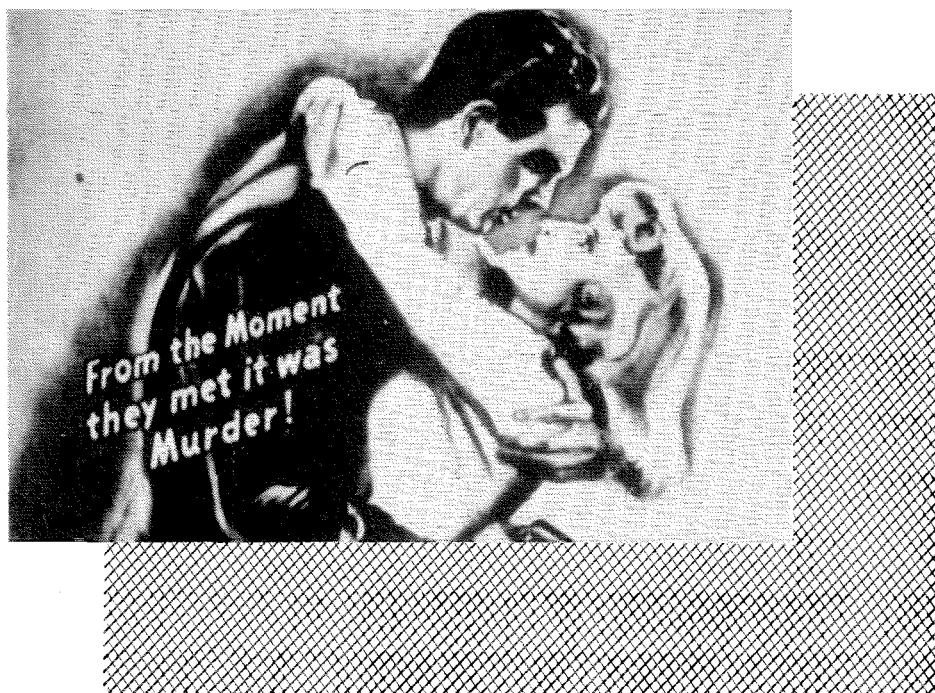


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SCREEN

INCORPORATING SCREEN EDUCATION



The Literary Adaptation:

**Desire, Transgression and James M Cain
Sex, Modernism and 'The History Man'
Television's Classic Serials**

**A Brecht for the Eighties?
Self as Image in Photography
The Pioneering Programmes of ZDF**

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EDITORIAL

This is the first issue of a new magazine. It will be published on a bi-monthly schedule, enabling current coverage of events in cinema and television to be added to the continuing work of *Screen* and *Screen Education*. A new editorial board has been formed and a new editor appointed: we hope to reflect this change in emphasis as well as to preserve the continuity of SEFT's two previous publications.

Screen's quarterly format, launched in 1971, pioneered forms of serious attention to film, and latterly television, which had no real precedent in Britain. In the past few years, this work has been developed (and challenged) by *Screen Education*, launched by SEFT as a companion journal in 1974. We hope to add new readers and concerns to those already addressed by these publications: students as well as teachers; cultural workers as well as academics; readers who are ill-served by the dominant strains of critical journalism; and those few critics who serve us well.

The aim of this expanded address is not to abandon theoretical work, but to promulgate it more widely. This may be accomplished by reviewing a body of analysis for a new context, as Sylvia Harvey does here in her critical recapitulation of *Screen's* pioneering work on Brecht, or by insisting upon new objects for theory—as Paul Kerr argues in his study of TV's classic serials.

Terry Dennett and Jo Spence's photographic essay continues *Screen Education's* ventures into this genre with an unusual 'history' of the medium. Their use of the female model, in particular, has already created controversy and will be addressed

in a future issue. Meanwhile, the photographers offer their own defence of their strategy, and retrospective comment on how it fared in exhibition.

The German TV channel ZDF's *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* has commissioned adventurous work from independent film-makers for over a decade. Its output is currently the subject of a retrospective at the National Film Theatre and the Goethe Institute in London; its methods provide a contrast to prevailing relationships between cinema and television in Britain and the USA.

Mick Eaton's piece on the recent Humphrey Jennings exhibition and Steve Neale's on the BBC's current Orson Welles retrospective examine contemporary media events and the conditions of their reception. The BBC season is treated as an educational resource—a potential largely neglected in the case of television's programming of feature films. The spread of domestic video is now making serious study of cinema and broadcast material a possibility for many more than those engaged in formal education courses. SEFT's new magazine aims to foster this development, as well as indicating the continued potential of public cinema exhibition for radical work in the area of representations. Broadcasting, video and cinema are undergoing profound transformation; this journal will be concerned with their aesthetic, education and social implications.

The symposium on the Literary Adaptation inaugurates a regular series of thematic features. The next issue will carry several pieces on Cinema and History, and future numbers will examine Sexual Politics and Censorship, and Television and the Fourth Channel. We welcome contributions on these themes, as well as proposals for further work.

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

THE

LITERARY ADAPTATION

AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN ELLIS

About 30% of narrative films made in Hollywood's classic period were adapted from novels and short stories. Popular literature was the principal source, the novels of James M Cain or Olive Higgins Prouty, the short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* or *Ladies' Home Journal*. Culturally respectable sources were rather more rare. The opposite is the case with British television. It specialises in adapting the culturally accredited nineteenth-century novel for the twentieth-century world television market. In each case the actual processes of adaptation are remarkably similar; the reasons are rather less so. Hollywood was principally interested in the tried and tested, narratives that had already been polished and presented to an audience before conversion into a film. British television prefers the tried and trusted, novels which guarantee a substantial audience at home and abroad, drawn by the cultural circulation of an idea of 'Dickens' or 'Waugh'.

In each case, as Paul Kerr points out, it is not the novel that is adapted, it is the illusion of reality that the novel claims to produce. Adaptation is a process of reducing a pre-existent piece of writing to a series of functions: characters, locations, costumes, actions and strings of narrative events. Adaptation for cinema assumes a concentration of narratives into a short length whereas television adaptation thrives on the multiplication of incidents that characterises the classic novel. Yet in each case the assumed aim of the process of adaptation is the same, to reproduce the contents of the novel on the screen. Hence the habitual reaction of conventional criticism to a literary adaptation: a judgement as to whether the adaptation has kept faith with the novel. The whole marketing strategy of adaptations from literary classics or from 'bestsellers' encourages such an assessment.

The real aim of an adaptation is rather different. The adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory. The adaptation consumes this memory, aiming to efface it with the presence of its own images. The successful adaptation is one that is able to replace the memory of the novel with the process of a filmic or televisual representation. Thus Malcolm Bradbury's response to the adaptation of his character Howard Kirk, confessed to Phillip Simpson: Bradbury has forgotten his own image of Kirk in favour of the figure of Anthony Sher playing the part for television. The adaptation has repeated even Bradbury's own conception and memory of the

character, and in doing so has effaced it. The faithfulness of the adaptation is the degree to which it can rework and replace a memory. This process is always likely to fail to some degree, as the generation of a memory from a reading of a text will involve associations of a contingent and personal nature as well as more culturally pervasive ones.

The form of the narrative novel resists re-reading in our culture: the vast majority of novels are designed to be read once and once only, just as the narrative film is intelligible at one viewing. Re-reading or re-viewing the same text always threatens to disappoint: the process of production of the illusion becomes too obvious, the memory interferes. Adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original representation, and repeating the production of a memory. The process of adaptation should thus be seen as a massive investment (financial and psychic) in the desire to repeat particular acts of consumption

SCREEN READER

2

Cinema and Semiotics

Contains material published in *Screen* 1971-73, now out of print, focussing on the early work of Christian Metz and the critical debates that this provoked. The articles situate an emerging semiology of film within a context of structural linguistics and ensuing questions of textual analysis, authorship and ideology.

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within a form of representation that discourages such a repetition. From this point of view there is no difference between the filming of a pre-existent novel or the novelisation of a pre-existent film. Certainly the effects upon the institution of book publishing are remarkably similar: television transmission develops sales of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* as a mass paperback just as it does of Wilfred Greatorex's spin-off novel from his TV series, *Airline*.

However, the mass paperback market is not the only cultural institution to be interested in the adaptation. Education seizes upon the adaptation from the literary classic to serve rather more dubious ends. Showing recalcitrant students the film or the television serial is regarded as a way to encourage them to read the original novel. In its most extreme form, this approach would regard the adaptation as transmitting the values of the original: such was the attitude to David Lean's films of Dickens in some areas of British secondary education. Nowadays, the literary adaptation is taken up in American education as a serious question because it combines elements of a general education with an induction into middle-brow culture for a conveniently large group of students. As Morris Beja writes to introduce his *Film and Literature* (Longmans, 1979):

The focus is neither on film nor on written literature, but on understanding and appreciating each form on its own and in relation to the other. The premise behind the entire book – like that of most of the courses for which it is intended – is that there is a great value in looking at the two genres [sic] together; such a pairing enables us to get a sense of all that they share, to be sure, but also of all the traits that they do not, so that one may grasp as well what is unique about each form . . . At such times the 'book addict' or the 'movie fan' – either one a fine thing to be – becomes as well a student of literature, or of film, or of both. Surely at least as fine a thing to be.

Such an approach elides the institutional differences between the novelistic, the cinematic and the televisual every bit as much as it elides the different historical moments into which novel and adaptation are produced and consumed.

The three articles here offer different accounts of the process of literary adaptation. Paul Kerr traces the development of the institution of the 'classic serial' within television, progressively demarcated as a specialised area of production. Phillip Simpson examines the very different historical moments of the novel and television series *The History Man*, tracing the adaptation's attempt to retain certain features of the novel's 'modernism' against the grain of the institution of the classic serial. Frank Krutnik examines the importance of James M Cain's novels to Hollywood in the 1940s, indicating how the adaptation of his *Mildred Pierce* conforms more closely to a memory of Cain's work than does the original novel. He concludes with caustic comments on the current trend of re-adaptation of Cain's work for a very different kind of cinema.

CLASSIC SERIALS —TO BE CONTINUED

PAUL KERR TRACES THE MOBILISATION
OF THE CLASSIC REALIST TEXT

¹ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Fontana, 1974, p 61.

² John Caughie, 'Rhetoric, Pleasure and Art Television', *Screen*, vol 22 no 4, p 31. It seems appropriate to refer to the classic serial as a television genre both because of the widespread use of the term and because, for Caughie, the wider category of 'art television' may be less a genre with specific codes than it is a working ideology within television and criticism: the ideology of television as a writer's medium.' Consequently, the status of the classic serial within 'art television' is crucial, simultaneously incarnating and extinguishing the possibility of authorial expressivity.

*The serial as a form now gets its prestige from dramatisation of well known works; in Britain significantly offered as 'Classic Serials', and many of them rebroadcast in the United States, no less significantly, as 'Masterpiece Theatre'. . . . if the form has been overlaid, understandably, by the 'classic' emphasis . . . that is a particular cultural mediation which it is necessary to understand and look for ways beyond.*¹

WHETHER OR NOT 1982 turns out to be the year in which British television, in the shape of Channel 4, finally begins to look for ways beyond the classic serial, it's certainly an appropriate moment to revisit both *Brideshead* and its ancestor adaptations to attempt to understand the form and its functions. Appropriate not only because of the unprecedented budget preceding and the media blitz following that latest and most lavish example of the genre to have hit our screens; nor simply because of the aesthetic changes which the new channel's rhetoric promises; but also because the classic serial seems much more than a particular cultural mediation, seems so embedded in and at the same time such an embodiment of British television.

Classic serials are the kinds of programmes conjured up by the journalistic cliché about British TV being the best in the world (hence the Masterpiece Theatre rubric); the kinds of programmes which sit snugly alongside single plays and cultural documentaries at the quality end of the television spectrum, simultaneously straddling 'art television' and 'costume drama'. And as John Caughie argued in the last issue of *Screen*,

*Progressive discourses about television have to take 'art television' seriously, both in its institutional place and in its individual programmes and programme categories, insofar as it is 'art television' which informs and supports the contexts, the working ideologies, the standards and the practices of 'good television', giving it its cultural prestige and its social credibility.*²

Caughie concentrates his analysis on the single play, but he emphasises that this is not the only site of 'art television'; indeed, he points to two other possible 'programme categories', the documentary drama and the prestige documentary series, as candidates for inclusion in the canon. A fourth contender, I would submit, is that of the classic serial; indeed

Alistair Cook, host of Masterpiece Theatre, made his television name by presenting a number of prestige documentary series.

Articles about specific film and television genres generally start out with some sort of definition, but neither Raymond Williams' 'dramatisation of well known works', nor the more tortuously tautological 'classic serials are serialised classics' seems to get us very far. Indeed, after more than 30 years of classic serials on British television such definitions seem all but superfluous. Both the term 'the classic serial' and the television form it describes are so familiar to programme makers, critics and viewers alike that it is perhaps less urgent to ask *what* classic serials are than to ask *why*.

Of all television's institutional imperatives the most important is that of serialisation itself.³ And yet the serial remains the least discussed of television's dramatic forms, in spite – or perhaps because of – its ratings success over both series and single plays. For while the single play remains the most prestigious slot in the drama schedules, site of fine writing and great acting (i.e. Art) and the series occupies the other end of the aesthetic spectrum, replacing popular cinema as the space of generic formulae like the cop show and the sit com (i.e. Entertainment), the serial straddles an uneasy middleground embracing everything from family romance to science fiction. Recently, the two ends of the serial's spectrum in terms of respectability – the soap opera and the cycle of single plays – have begun to receive some attention, but the 'middle-brow' middleground of the serial, of which the classic serial is perhaps the most important, has still escaped extended consideration. Both journalistically and educationally, classic serials seem to be either beyond criticism or beneath contempt; in either case, we learn little or nothing about the operation of television. Thus Len Masterman's *Teaching About Television* concludes its account of classroom work on classic serials by emphasising television's 'potentialities as an educational stimulus', not toward an increased understanding of the mass media, but as 'a stimulus to reading'.⁴

So firstly, what characterises the serial and, secondly, what constitutes a classic novel? Serialisation is perhaps the primary characteristic of television as it is presently organized. There are regular slots in schedules to be filled, regular audiences to be won, regularised crewing and contractual arrangements, budgeting, studio allocations etc to be complied with; series and especially serials can economise on fixed costs like sets and costumes far more easily and efficiently than can single plays.

Raymond Williams has distinguished the *serial* as 'a dramatised action divided into episodes' from the *series*, which employs continuity of character or format but not of action.⁵ And this continuity across episodes is both the key institutional factor and the characteristic most often cited in critiques of the serial as a constraining form. Continuity across episodes encourages (some would say enforces) the implementation of cliff-hanger endings whose function is to hook and hold an audience's attention until the next episode. On ITV, though to a considerably lesser extent than on American commercial television, the cliff-hanger is also employed at

³ See the discussion of the serial phenomenon in Edward Buscombe, 'Creativity in Television', *Screen Education*, Summer 1980, no 35, pp 5-17.

⁴ Len Masterman, *Teaching about Television*, London, Macmillan, 1980, pp 173-175.

⁵ Williams, *op cit*, p 61.

⁶ Christine Geraghty, 'The Continuous Serial – A Definition', in Dyer, Geraghty, Jordan, Lovell, Paterson and Stewart, eds, *Coronation Street*, BFI Television Monograph 13, pp 9-18.

⁷ Phillip Drummond, 'Structural and Narrative Constraints in The Sweeney', *Screen Education*, Autumn 1976, no 20, p 16.

⁸ Drummond, op cit.

every commercial break, transforming drama into melodrama, as the conventional critique would have it. While all serials have these characteristics, however, some are open-ended, continuous with no evident resolution in sight (eg *Coronation Street*). Others – thrillers and science fiction serials for example – have a more limited lifespan, the suspense and audience interest being generated in direct proportion to the success with which the serial in question constructs its narrative enigmas and solves them over a given number of episodes and a given amount of screen time. Classic serials, similarly, cannot exceed a certain length since the novels on which they are based contain only so much narrative material to be dramatised.

If there is a comparative lack of theoretical work on the short-form serial, however, it is possible to supplement and consolidate our ideas about classic serials in particular by comparison on the one hand with the continuous serial and on the other with the long-running series. Discussing *Coronation Street*, Christine Geraghty has usefully isolated 'three key characteristics' of the continuous serial: its organization of time (both plot-time and audience time – the same serial being transmitted in the same slot in the schedule week after week); its sense of an almost infinite future; and its interweaving of a number of only indirectly related stories and characters.⁶ Phillip Drummond, on the other hand, in analysing *The Sweeney* crime series, describes how

*The tenure of the television series... depends for its effect on its intermittence and its periodicity (weekly and seasonal). Compulsively repetitive, it thus plays a simple game of absence/presence, its invariant features (central characters, plot type, dramatic structure) guaranteeing the success of recognition and identification, with only the rationing of subsidiary variants (villains and their villainies, details of action) forestalling complete redundancy.*⁷

Drummond concludes by calling such a series a 'form of "Memory Spectacle" committed to its formulae and yet to their embroidery'.⁸

It is relatively easy to establish which of Geraghty's criteria apply to the classic serial: classic serials are finite, they are almost always anchored around only one or two protagonists and a clear-cut narrative thrust. Drummond's criteria, on the other hand, are less useful here: for the BBC, at least, the classic serial has been institutionalised to the extent that it has become a kind of anthology series slot, appearing on certain days (the accustomed Sunday slot in particular involves a secularisation of religious awe into a kind of cultural humility), garnishing the schedule at important moments in the television year. (This is far more visible with ITV, whose classic serials coincide suspiciously with those periods when franchises are up for renewal.) The classic serial, then, is a kind of series of serials. (Another example of this apparent confusion of categories is *Doctor Who*, a long-running series composed of five or six episode serial adventures.) For the classic serial, the identification/recognition factor which Drummond referred to can thus function through

interserial comparisons, episode against episode, just as for *The Sweeney* comparisons can be made both in terms of prior episodes in that series as well with episodes from other crime series (and, indeed, with other non-televisual examples of the genre.) But classic serials take that comparative process considerable further: for the 'Memory Spectacle' of the classic serial also works in relation to the classic novel on which that serial is based, whether or not that novel has actually been read by the viewer. David Wade, has made the point – if rather less critically – about radio adaptations of Dickens:

⁹ David Wade, 'Popular Radio Drama' in *Radio Drama*, ed Peter Lewis, London, Longman, 1981, p 103.

Has anyone ever known, say, The Pickwick Papers to the point at which he feels he has sucked it dry and never wishes to hear the thing again? And yet, from another point of view, even works such as this possess a profound, almost numbing familiarity. They are part of our immense cultural baggage – more than that, part of a national rite – and as such must be heard to a considerable extent for the pleasure of the replay, the recital; or if not that, then because the hearer, seeing them as part of everybody else's cultural-ritual baggage, has not yet made them part of his own and has a guilty feeling that he ought to do so.⁹

I will return to the ideological role of such 'replays' and to the historical role of radio in the development of the classic serial below.

First, however, it is necessary to turn our attention toward the classic prose fiction on which so many television serials are based. The BBC's conception of literary classics does not differ remarkably from Leavis' Great Tradition, or the Penguin imprints, 'Penguin Classics' and 'Penguin English Library'. Ironically, a number of those very same novels which have been adapted for television were themselves originally published in serial form, in one of several then prevalent literary magazines. *Bentley's Miscellany*, at one time edited by Charles Dickens, serialised *Oliver Twist*, and *Cornhill* later serialised Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (but regarded the same author's *Return of the Native* as too controversial for publication).

I should say quite clearly that my intention here is *not* to repeat the familiar litany of the complaints against the serial form *per se*, but rather to question the kinds of serials that television currently offers and validates. Nor is the reference to the nineteenth century novel's own relationship with periodical publication meant to exemplify some alleged aesthetic quality produced within an already industrialised mode. Rather it relates to the question of compatibility between the media of prose and television. Donald Low, also writing about radio adaptations, has argued that:

Too much can be made of the kinship between literary tradition and print, and of the difference alleged to amount to incompatibility between the novelist's commitment to writing, and by implication to silent reading, and the medium of sound broadcasting... some of the greatest novelists, including the major Victorian figures in Britain, have kept in mind the widespread practice of reading stories aloud. One reason why Dickens is so well suited to

¹⁰ Donald Low, 'Classic Fiction by Radio', in *Radio Drama*, op cit pp 139-140.

¹¹ Caughie, op cit, p. 14.

¹² Colin McCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15 no 2, pp 7-27.

¹³ MacCabe, op cit, p 10.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ See Colin MacCabe, 'Days of Hope—a Response to Colin McArthur', *Screen*, Spring 1976, vol 17 no 1, pp 98-101 and 'Memory, Phantasy, Identity: Days of Hope and the Politics of the Past', *Edinburgh Magazine*, 1977, pp 13-17.

¹⁶ Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television: a World in Action', *Screen*, Summer 1977, vol 18 no 2, p 15.

*radio lies here. He thoroughly enjoyed giving public readings from his work, and quite clearly conceived of fiction as capable of being dramatically 'performed'. His own dramatic readings, did, in a sense, complete his communicative art . . . the language of the novel is speech based. This is borne out by narrative, description and authorial commentary, and above all is exemplified by dialogue. 'Voices' have a central place, however disguised.*¹⁰

The emphasis on radio adaptations does not diminish the pertinence of this argument. Indeed it is important to remember that voice and performance are still central to television drama and to classic serials in particular. And as John Caughie demonstrated in his discussion of television drama, radio is in many ways far closer to British television than cinema:

*the comparisons between the histories of cinema and television seem almost too neat: cinema spends the first thirty years of its existence with vision and no speech, and develops a highly elaborated visual rhetoric which survives the arrival of sound . . . broadcasting spends the first thirty years of its existence with speech and no vision, and develops a respect for the spoken word, the script, and the writer. Not only does television drama develop out of radio drama, it also develops with a strong respect for theatre as its most culturally prestigious cognate form. This not only inflects the working ideologies and discourses of television, but it also materially affects the recruitment of actors (and the status which is given to theatrical acting), and the recruitment of writers . . .*¹¹

This challenge to a purely literary basis for television classics has interesting implications for the debates on realism conducted in *Screen*. Classic serials have largely been adapted from precisely the same novels that Colin MacCabe employed in establishing the theoretical model of the classic realist text.¹² Using George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as his example, MacCabe described the classic realist text as that aesthetic mode in which each character's dialogue or subjective 'discourse' is surrounded by an apparently objective metalanguage, that of the unspoken, unwritten voice of authorial narration.

*Through the knowledge we gain from the narrative we can split the discourses of the various characters from their situation and compare what is said in those discourses with what has been revealed to us through narration.*¹³

MacCabe concludes the above passage with the remark that in classic cinema, the role taken in the novel by narrative prose is assumed by the camera so that 'The camera shows us what happens—it tells the truth against which we can measure the discourses.'¹⁴

In discussing television drama, MacCabe never really revised this model¹⁵ and elsewhere in *Screen* the project of television as a whole has been reduced to a similarly simple procedure 'the production-reproduction of the novelistic'¹⁶. The television versions of nineteenth century realist novels thus provide an inviting opportunity for reassess-

ing these propositions. When John Caughie argues that 'the visual supports rather than subverts the verbal' in British television drama; that television in this country is still considered to be 'a writer's medium' which inevitably 'privileges the script'¹⁷ MacCabe's contention that 'The camera shows us what happens – it tells the truth against which we can measure the discourses'¹⁸ becomes increasingly problematic. But if this is the case, where is the dominant discourse of the classic serial to be located?

Of course, not all the contributors to the debate about classic realism have agreed with MacCabe's arguments. Andrew Britton, for instance, has suggested that the metalanguage of the authorial narrative voice, far from being 'unspoken' and thus 'unwritten' is actually 'a speaking voice with its own unique emphases and modulations'¹⁹ and that this 'uniqueness' is crucial to the construction of the ideology of the artist that underwrote the realist movement. Colin McArthur, on the other hand, has concentrated on attempting to distinguish a 'radical' historical serial like *Days of Hope* from more conventional costume dramas by focusing on its content and context.²⁰ And Raymond Williams has argued that the concept of classic realism is by no means adequate to the distinct and discrete strategies adopted by the nineteenth century novel. For Williams, novels like *Vanity Fair*, *Dombey and Son*, *Mary Barton* and *Wuthering Heights* (all of which were first published in 1848 and all of which have since served as sources for classic serials)

*can be characterised as bourgeois realism only by an extraordinary flattening, a mutual composition which in fact succeeded in hiding the actual and effective process, the complex formation of the real forms.*²¹

Whether or not Williams' critique of the concept of the classic realist text is persuasive in relation to literature, the pertinence of his formulation for the television adaptation of those same literary works is striking. Indeed, if allegations of an 'extraordinary flattening' can be directed at MacCabe's theoretical model, how much more accurate are they when redirected at the processes of 'adaptation' which produce the classic serial. Careful comparison between the novels in question, for example *Wuthering Heights* and *Vanity Fair*, and their tele-versions, reveals the tendency towards homogenisation in television adaptation. The very profound formal differences that Williams identifies between such novels became all but invisible on television. And even the most schematic consideration of the process of adaptation reveals – without recourse to close textual analysis – that it is less a 'novel' as such that is being adapted than its plot, characters, setting, dialogue and, of course, cultural status. To return to Donald Low:

*Essentially what takes place in the radio recreation of classic fiction is that words of beauty and power that tell a story are spoken with clarity and distinction*²²

¹⁷ Caughie, op cit.

¹⁸ MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', op cit, p 10.

¹⁹ Andrew Britton, 'Living Historically', *Framework* no 3, pp 12-14.

²⁰ Colin MacArthur, 'Days of Hope', *Screen*, Winter 1976-77, vol 16 no 4, pp 139-144; and *Television and History*, BFI Television Monograph no 8.

²¹ Raymond Williams, 'Forms of English Fiction' in 1848: *The Sociology of Literature*, University of Essex, 1978, p 278.

²² Low, op cit, p 139.

²³ Mike Poole, 'Englishness for Export', *Time Out*, March 7-13, 1980.

²⁴ Buscombe, op cit, pp 7-8.

It is this which problematises MacCabe's point; for in almost every classic serial it is precisely not via either camera or *mise en scène* that the narrative truth of the original is retold. Indeed, elements of the original literary narration are often lifted from the novel and inserted wholesale into the dialogue: dialogue which is spoken with such clarity and distinction (in conventional British theatrical modes), dialogue whose performance is so clearly coded that its objective (narrative) or subjective (characteral) status is immediately apparent.

For the very desire to adapt classic novels for British television stems at least partially from the degree to which television is still seen as a transparent medium and, in Britain, as a transparent technology whose function, quite simply, is to facilitate the 'transmission' of the writer's work. Indeed, perhaps one explanation for the relative lack of critical work on classic serials is that very assumption of transparency.

Purists would argue that this is no bad thing, that the only legitimate function of an adaptation is to ghost the original. But of course once such an approach is adopted it becomes impossible to evaluate the finished product in anything other than literary terms. The question becomes not what kind of use does it make of the book, or even what kind of television results, but simply is it 'true' to the original? And in this sense adaptations are just another instance of the way in which television consistently works to conceal the kind of construction being put on the material it presents.²³



The BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* 1980) adapted by Fay Weldon.

In the process of adaptation from novel to television serial, therefore, at least three important and interrelated transformations are underway. The first usually involves the disappearance of literary narration or at the very least (as in *Brideshead*) the implantation of it into an off-screen voice rather than an on-the-page one. The second concerns the question of creativity and the attribution of television authorship. Certainly few critics could cite many directors who have made their names in classic serials, though several adaptors, including Hugh Whitmore, Elaine Morgan, Fay Weldon, Giles Cooper and *Brideshead*'s John Mortimer and several producers like James Cellan Jones, Donald Wilson and Jonathan Powell have specialised in the field.

Edward Buscombe has argued that 'the search for a single point of origin... still relentlessly pursued in almost all the television criticism now being written... is more an ideological project than a genuine quest for knowledge'.²⁴ Buscombe is discussing a crime series, *Hazell*, but his argument stands, with one or two qualifications, for classic serials: the attribution of individual 'authorship' or 'creativity' is mistaken both because of the collaboration involved in the television industry production process (between writers/directors/producers/script editors/actors and so on) and because of the influence of what he calls 'a complex of pre-existing ideological constructs'. For classic serials, whether one or more writer/adaptor is concerned, the job of the writer/adaptor is neither to think up stories, nor to invent characters but to produce or adapt lines of dialogue for those already existing characters to speak in already deter-

mined plot situations. To complicate matters still further, the position of the original author (of the novel being adapted) is also an exceedingly ambivalent one: on the one hand she or he is foregrounded as guarantor of the cultural commodity on offer; but on the other, s/he often vanishes into the classic serial format (arguably, classic authors and their works are all but interchangeable in such a slot). The classic serial is thus left with 'words of beauty and power which tell a story' and simultaneously reinforce a high cultural memory.

What, then, replaces those unadapted and arguably unadaptable elements of prose fiction in classic serials? The crucial and oft-recurring concepts are those of fidelity and authenticity, and it is here that the role of *mise en scène* becomes clear. The former relates to the deployment, wherever possible, of direct quotations from the novel both of dialogue and of decor (settings, costumes etc). MacCabe argues that the classic realist text naturalises the process of the production of meaning via the assumption of a familiar world of objects and attitudes shared by reader and text. In narrative prose, sitting rooms are simply described, but in classic serials props are employed specifically as signifiers of the past and its faithful and meticulous reconstruction. Such ambitions of authenticity function to factify the fiction, literally to prop it up, performing a positivist role as the tangible trace of a lost era. There are different ways of achieving such aims but the commonest is simply that of painstaking historical accuracy; rather less common, is the employment of culturally coded imagery, like the impressionist iconography employed in *Therese Raquin*.

*Most of the early editions of great works, particularly Dickens, have original illustrations, and these are used by the designer and the costume supervisors as the basis for their designs. (They are also studied for casting and make-up.) Contemporary prints, photographs of period architecture and furniture are all carefully studied. When Madame Bovary and The Scarlet and the Black, for example, were produced, the designers went to France to visit the actual towns mentioned in the book and to obtain detailed drawings and photographs.*²⁵

Colin McArthur has demonstrated that television's cannibalisation of history is by no means restricted to drama – since both light entertainment programmes and documentaries employ elements of it on occasion; and costume drama itself is an elastic enough mode to embrace almost anything from biopics to fictional family sagas, from period cop-shows and sit-coms to classic serials. For McArthur,

*important distinctions have to be made between programmes which primarily signal 'nostalgia for an earlier period' and those which signify 'adaptation of a Great Literary Classic'*²⁶

One might reformulate the second half of McArthur's distinction as something like 'nostalgia for (high) literary culture'. Until relatively



Impressionist iconography in the BBC's *Therese Raquin* (1980).

²⁵ Douglas Allen and Michael Voysey, 'Classic Serials', *Journal of the Society of Film and Television Arts*, 1965, no 20, special issue on 'Presenting the Classics', p 3.

²⁶ McArthur, *Television and History*, op cit, p 40.



Nostalgia in an Edwardian setting: London Weekend Television's *Upstairs, Downstairs* (mid-1970s).

recently, however, a more obvious rule of thumb definition was also applicable: the nostalgia category consisted generally of twentieth century settings (*Upstairs, Downstairs* is the best and perhaps most important example) while the 'Classic' category, as we have seen, tended to revolve around nineteenth century sources and settings. In the last few years this schematic separation of modes has become increasingly untenable and *Brideshead Revisited* is only the most recent example of a twentieth century realist classic being serialised. Previously, twentieth century novels had usually been employed only on occasions when the format itself was being stretched (via its ability to represent sexuality, violence or class politics, e.g. in serials like *Roads to Freedom*, *Eyeless in Giza*, and more recently *Sons and Lovers* and *The History Man*).

In order to begin to understand this development, let us turn briefly to the history of the classic serial. BBC Radio's early involvement with the 're-publication' of literary works necessitated an important relationship with the West End theatre, from which new productions of already established classics were transmitted live or adapted almost verbatim. In his history of the BBC Television Script Unit Robin Wade has described how between 1936 and 1939 (when BBC TV closed down for the duration) the proportion of original drama to theatrical and literary adaptations was minute; the earliest 'classic' TV adaptation he mentions is a 55-minute production of *Pride and Prejudice* broadcast in 1938. On its return to the airwaves after the war BBC TV resumed the practice of broadcasting 'readymades'; Wade singles out another Austen adaptation, *Emma*, in 1948 as a peak of the early post-war period. (Austen, like Dickens, had also been a favourite for radio adaptations.) Meanwhile, on BBC radio,

*The last development in drama before 1939 was the development of the dramatic serial programme, not along American soap opera lines, but as a genuine 'middlebrow' form of entertainment, seldom sinking lower, sometimes rising higher.*²⁷

Briggs cites two examples, a twelve part adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* (the first classic serial?) and *Send for Paul Temple*, adapted from a Francis Durbridge thriller. Ten years later, in 1938, *Mrs Dales' Diary* was launched and finally, in 1951, BBC radio followed up with *The Archers*. The class cultural split within the serial was already being institutionalised. It was also in 1951, interestingly, that BBC television launched its own first classic serial (as opposed to one-off adaptation). But this was not simply the first classic serial on television – it was the first TV serial of any kind. According to Robin Wade, 'The first drama serial was a six-episode dramatisation by Cedric Willis of Trollope's *The Warden*, and its transmission from May 12th 1951 inaugurated a fine tradition of classic serials...'.²⁸

Four years later, in 1955, ITV brought an adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* to the screen in its first week of broadcasting. In 1958, under increasing pressure from their humiliation in the ratings, the BBC

²⁷ Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, volume 2, p. 169.

²⁸ Robin Wade, *Where the Difference Began*, BBC Television Script Unit, 1975, p. 6.

responded to their rival's headway in drama by appointing ABC Television's Sydney Newman as Head of Drama. Newman's first decision was to restructure the BBC Drama Department into two separate sections, one for the prestigious single play and the other for the popular series and serials. There were two other significant developments for BBC serials in that year: the transmission of the BBC's first 'continuous serial', *Starr & Company*, scripted by Bill Naughton; and the advent of videotape, which for the first time enabled drama productions to avoid live transmission. The move to tape, however, was not finally accomplished until the early '60s. Meanwhile the drama department was becoming increasingly divided (not least through conflicting commitments to film and tape and live transmission) and in 1963 Donald Wilson was appointed as the first Head of Serials.

The following year saw two further developments – the arrival of BBC 2 and the BBC 1 launch of *The Wednesday Play*. In its first week of transmission BBC 2 began broadcasting its own classic serial, *Madame Bovary*, while BBC 1 responded with Donald Wilson's adaptation of the more popular *Rupert of Hentzau*. Similarly, when BBC 2 began broadcasting in colour in 1967 it followed the immensely successful black and white adaptation of *The Forsyte Saga* (also adapted by Donald Wilson) with the first colour classic serial, *Vanity Fair*. In January 1968, BBC 2 followed this serial with the far more popular *Portrait of a Lady* starring the specially imported *Dr Kildare* lead, Richard Chamberlain. In 1969 BBC 1 and ITV also moved to colour and the classic serial's appeal to the popular audience, via the attractions of colourful costumes and lavish location photography (facilitated by newly available lightweight cameras) became increasingly imperative.

However, while ITV tended to treat the genre as an exceptional indulgence, the BBC began to institutionalise it within its schedules and structures. Thus, in the '60s for instance, while ITV excelled in the continuous serial mode with *Emergency Ward 10*, *Coronation Street* and *Crossroads*, the BBC's soap operas were rarely much more popular – and never so successful critically or on the international market – as their classic serials. Since *The Forsyte Saga*, in fact, the list of 'classic' authors whose work has been adapted by the BBC has included Austen, Balzac, all three Brontës, Collins, Cooper, Dickens, Dumas, Eliot, Flaubert, Gaskell, Gibbon, Hardy, Hemingway, Hugo, Huxley, James, Mann, Maugham, Priestley, Sartre, Scott, Stendhal, Stevenson, Tolstoy, Twain, Turgenev, Waugh, Wells and Zola among many others.

The very existence of the classic serial as an institutional – and institutionalised – category has therefore meant that any serial scheduled in an associated slot and accorded similar special treatment by the company concerned has been automatically designated a classic. And that status refers both to the prestige of the original novel in the literary canon and to the standing of the specific serial in the television canon. Thus several historical/biographical serials have been aired which while not originating in a novel from within the Great Tradition share the settings, style, period and heroic personae of their literary predecessors. For if the



By 1970, more than 160 million had watched the BBC's *Forsyte Saga* (1967).



The first Masterpiece Theatre: launched in 1971 with the BBC's *First Churchills*.

serialisation of classic fiction recirculates the 'great man' theory of culture via the discourses of literary authorship, so too the biographical sagas that television has spun around royal, aristocratic and political families has done the same thing for history (and has the same cinematic precursors). Nor, at least since the early '70s, has television restricted its serialisation of fiction to the 'literary classics'.

Nowhere is this confusion more apparent than in America, where it is the imprimatur of a prestige slot in the schedules rather than a pre-existing cultural consensus which confers the status of 'classic'. The Masterpiece Theatre anthology slot was launched in January 1971 with the transmission of the BBC's *The First Churchills* but since then has included both the television equivalent of bio-pics, adaptations of best-sellers and the more conventional classic serials. Based in Boston's WGBH, the anthology is hosted by Alistair Cook and networked (at nine pm local time on Sundays) by the Public Broadcasting System to some 292 local stations. Funded by the Mobil Corporation, Masterpiece Theatre has screened such serials as *Upstairs, Downstairs*; *The Duchess of Duke Street*; *Lillie*; *Shoulder to Shoulder*; *Testament of Youth*; *Danger UXB*; *The Six Wives of Henry the Eighth*; *Edward and Mrs Simpson*; *Poldark*; *Elizabeth R*; *I Claudius*; as well as five Dorothy Sayers adaptations and the predictable pantheon of James, Dickens, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.²⁹

It remains, finally, to try to account for the success of the classic serial. *The Forsyte Saga*, for instance, reached an average weekly audience of 15,500,000 in Britain, and by 1970 the BBC could boast that it had been watched by more than 160,000,000 people in 45 countries including both the United States and the USSR. Donald Low, discussing radio dramatisations of the classics, pointed to the audience's 'craving for storytelling', to the comparative cheapness of book-based as opposed to original, commissioned drama, and to a desire, instilled during the war among BBC executives for what he calls 'cultural propaganda'.³⁰ Low's formula for the radio classic – 'words of beauty and power... spoken with clarity and distinction' suggests a nostalgia borne of austerity for some *ancien regime*. Evelyn Waugh summoned up similar values in his preface to *Brideshead Revisited*: written in the 'bleak period... of soya beans and Basic English', 'the book is infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language.'³¹ Robin Wade echoes these concerns by explaining the success of the classic serial as part of a massive popular reaction to the lowlife excesses of *The Wednesday Play*.³²

Mike Poole, on the other hand, has described classic serials as 'cultured soap operas, that episode by episode unfolding of a reassuring pattern of identification and resolution which hooks mass audiences while respectfully paying its dues to literature'.³³ Poole has also argued that television's commitment to adaptations of the classics owes as much to British cinema as to BBC radio. He suggests that in the immediate postwar period

²⁹ For an illustrated coffee table accompaniment to Masterpiece Theatre's anthology of classic serials, see *Masterpieces: A Decade of Classics on Television*, by Alistair Cook, Bodley Head, 1982. For a discussion of the influence of classic serials on American commercial television, see Paul Kerr, 'The Origins of the Mini-Series', *Broadcast*, March 12, 1979.

³⁰ Low, *op cit*, p 138.

³¹ Evelyn Waugh, preface to *Brideshead Revisited*, Penguin, 1980, p 7.

³² Wade, *op cit*, p 35.

³³ Poole, *op cit*.

British cinema was enjoying a brief international boom based on successful film versions of quintessentially English works like Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Dickens' *Great Expectations*. The BBC learnt quickly that Tradition plus Englishness equalled prestige and 'respectability'. A key influence here were the films of David Lean – *Great Expectations* in 1946 and *Oliver Twist* two years later. Lean broke with a long tradition of theatricalising Dickens in favour of strong narrative line, controlled character acting and period feel – in short he created the style still discernible in the majority of television adaptations.³⁴



Above, another Dickens adaptation: the BBC's *Our Mutual Friend* (1978). Below, the BBC's 'Portrait of a Lady' (1968).



(Accordingly, there have been more than 30 Dickens adaptations at the BBC alone since 1950; ITV adaptations, though considerably fewer in total, have included the award-winning *Hard Times*.) Other '40s films adapted from literary classics in Britain include H G Wells' *Kipps* and *Anna Karenina*, as well as the less prestigious *London Belongs To Me* and *Fanny By Gaslight*. All of these, as well as the two Lean/Dickens films mentioned above, have recently been readapted for the small screen.

In an article on the terms deployed in the debates for a national 'quality' cinema in the 1940s and again in the '70s, John Ellis isolated a number of critical concepts:³⁵ 'good taste', 'humanism', 'the dissemination of high (literary) culture', 'restraint', 'authenticity' – all of these reappear in support of the classic serial. But if the aesthetic of high literary culture and good taste which underpins the success of the classic

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality – Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and the Seventies', *Screen*, Autumn 1978, vol 19 no 3.

³⁶ Rod Allen, 'International Co-Production: Cash for the Concept', *Edinburgh International Television Festival Magazine*, 1978, pp 22-24.



Petroleum prestige: Thames Television's *Edward and Mrs Simpson* (1981).

serial is problematic, so too is its status as national culture, as the most familiar image both of Britain and its television. Consider, for example, the BBC's production of *Portrait of a Lady*: both the choice of a novel with an American heroine and the casting of Richard ('Dr Kildare') Chamberlain eased the serial's sales in the US market. Now co-producers like New York's Public Broadcasting station WNET-TV channel corporate funds toward 'British' ventures. Much of the £1,000,000 budget for Granada's *Hard Times* came from WNET's corporate sponsors, which, over the years have included such charitable foundations as Macdonalds, Mobil, Ford, Rockefeller, Xerox, Exxon and IBM. At first, apparently, such sponsors exerted little or no influence but

*As the industrial practice of co-production became more prevalent, however, the needs and attitudes of the corporate co-financier crept into programme decision-making. Of course British producers claim that they retain complete control over their projects, and that co-production finance is only sought on the basis of a completed proposal which would not be altered at the behest of a commercial sponsor. The fact remains that there is a growing tendency to propose only those projects which would find favour with corporate sponsors in the first place – costume drama, for instance, rather than contemporary drama...*³⁶

John Wyver and Carl Gardner have suggested that

*sponsoring corporations like Mobil and Exxon want advertising prestige from their support of good television. A British drama series, particularly a 'prestigious' and non-controversial one, like Lillie or Edward and Mrs Simpson running for weeks and weeks is the perfect artifact for image-building. Period pieces will often celebrate exactly the values of confidence and stability with which corporations want to be associated.*³⁷

Of course, the BBC is itself a corporation, and Arthur Taylor, president of the Rockefeller-owned cable company, The Entertainment Channel, which has first option on all BBC productions for the next ten years, has suggested that the BBC may have been attracted to the deal because the involvement of Rockefeller 'probably gave the BBC people a sense of stability'.³⁸ Peter Hansen, programming executive of The Entertainment Channel, has already pencilled in co-production money for *The Woman in White*, *Stalky and Co* and the old reliable *Great Expectations* – all for this first season of the channel's existence.

The Entertainment Channel, like other co-production companies, denies any involvement in actual programme-making decisions – but their ability to select from a surplus of proposals already involves a powerful role in programme selection. Even the BBC's own sales arm, BBC Enterprises, now ploughs back profits into co-productions with the BBC. Peter Lord, Enterprises' Sales Manager, has been quoted as saying that 'At one time we never took an interest in a programme until it was actually made, and then we'd try and sell it. Now we hear about things when they're working titles. We're all in constant touch all the time and

³⁷ Carl Gardner and John Wyver, 'The Single Play: From Reithian Reverence to Cost Accounting and Censorship', *Edinburgh International Television Festival Magazine*, 1980, pp 48-49. Gardner and Wyver argue that the classic serial manages to combine the continuation of the traditions of Reithian respect for high culture with a tasteful and highly profitable product.

³⁸ Cheryl Aldridge, 'The BBC Gets Down to Business', *City Limits*, March 5-11, 1982.

they're much more willing to listen to us.' ³⁹ Gardner and Wyver have noted that:

*The effects of this process on the content of TV drama are both predictable and observable... the loss of cultural specificity... or the production of a mythologised British 'history' and 'tradition'... In strictly domestic economic terms these (programmes) are expensive but become a 'good investment' when guaranteed foreign sales are involved. This marketing of British culture as a televisual commodity has become almost a corollary of the British tourist industry and fulfills a similar role in international terms.*⁴⁰

Several serials can be cited which don't correspond to the Gardner/Wyver model (e.g. *Nana*, *Roads to Freedom*, *Eyeless in Gaza*, *Sons and Lovers* and *The History Man*), but almost all are based on twentieth century fiction or infused with rather too much sex, violence or politics for American co-production.

Meanwhile, the co-productions continue: the BBC's recent ventures have included one with Paramount on *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; with Time-Life on *Rebecca* and *Crime and Punishment*; and with the London Film Company on *Testament of Youth* and *Therese Raquin*. ITV has been involved in fewer, but bigger, co-productions: most notably with WNET again, sponsored by Exxon Ltd, on *Brideshead Revisited*. Which brings us back, like all good classic realist texts, to where we came in: Channel 4. Channel 4's first major dramatic commission was for a filmed version of the Royal Shakespeare Company's prestigious production of *Nicholas Nickleby* (adapted by David Edgar). The TV version is going to be longer than the stage original and will be broadcast in four episodes. *Nicholas Nickleby* is being produced by Primetime Television in co-production with RM Productions (Munich) and Mobil. In the United States, it has been scheduled for screening in the Mobil Showcase Network, to be hosted by Peter Ustinov. And in Britain it may be signalling that Channel 4's 'way beyond' serialised literature is serialised theatre—a prospect which should do little to dissipate the continuing confusion of 'television culture' with television's transmission of non-televisual culture.

³⁹ quoted in Gardner and Wyver, op cit.

⁴⁰ Gardner and Wyver, op cit.



Continuing co-production: *Testament of Youth* (1980) financed by the BBC and the London Film Company.

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'PRESENTNESS PRECISE': NOTES ON 'THE HISTORY MAN'

PHILLIP SIMPSON CONSIDERS A
CONTROVERSIAL TV ADAPTATION

¹ The views of Malcolm Bradbury as quoted and summarised here are taken from his August 1981 Guardian Lecture at the National Film Theatre. The author was the interviewer on that occasion. Those of Robert Knights are from a discussion with him at the Education Department of the British Film Institute, for which I am extremely grateful.

² Malcolm Bradbury, *Eating People Is Wrong*, 1959, and *Stepping Westwards*, 1965.

ABOUT TWELVE MONTHS ago, the television adaptation of a novel about university life led to that flurry of letters to newspapers, quotation on other television shows, interviews and photo-articles which are the signs in British public life of a media event. This reaction was evoked by the adaptation of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* into a four-part television serial. When it appeared in 1975 the novel had received excellent reviews from the critics but none of the public notice accorded to the serial. To say why the adaptation was so popular with viewing figures rising for each episode, and why the media took it up, would demand some analysis of the way both texts were distributed, the cultural and political climate into which they were inserted, the nature of the response, and the hundred and one other elements which add up to conjunctural analysis. In the meantime, I'd like to make some speculative points in an effort to see what happens when a cultural product is 'adapted' from one medium to another: how the two *kinds* of texts operate differently; how these two *particular* texts operate; and how the writer of the novel, the director of the television version¹ and the mainstream critics saw the adaptation process. The series will be repeated again later in 1982 and the book has already been reprinted, so these speculations need not be the last words on the subject.

The first and most obvious point is that both book and tele-adaptation need to be seen within the context of expectations set up by the conventions they inhabit – the campus novel and the BBC serialisation. Like his two previous novels², Bradbury's *The History Man* provides a university setting to explore the politics of academic life, the conventional assumption being that universities are locations where theories of value, held values and actions immanent with value interact in laboratory-like condi-

tions: one moment characters pronounce about morals or politics, the next they act accordingly – or not. Campus novels rely upon a readership alert to the fact that the titles of both Howard Kirk, the History Man's, first book, *The Coming of the New Sex* and his doctoral thesis, *Christadelphianism in Wakefield*, are perfectly feasible yet, at the same time, satirical thrusts at fashion-mongering in sociology. Comic novels like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) or David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1978) suggest the persistence of the comic campus novel, but less amusing writers within the convention include Snow, Powell, Malamud, and McCarthy.

Unlike these novels, however, and unlike Bradbury's first two books, *The History Man* has some of the features of the modernist novel. It's not aleatory or heavily self-reflexive but the text does draw attention to itself and organises its narrative in ways which any adaptation would have to come to terms with. Instead of painterly or photographic realism of the conventional novel, tesserae of details are built into a mosaic: Bradbury says he used current Biba catalogues and copies of the *Guardian* 'to keep its presentness precise' and the book often employs synecdochal lists of goods or guests or activities to stand for a greater whole. The author himself appears in the book³ as:

*a lecturer in the English department, a man who, ten years earlier, had produced two tolerably well-known and acceptably reviewed novels, filled, as novels then were, with moral scruple and concern.*⁴

Characters in *The History Man* are presented allusively rather than through the detailed description of appearance or motivation which are the typical strategies of the nineteenth century realist novel. Behaviour is described very carefully, but no evaluation is conducted through a moralising discourse of the narrator; rather, ironic juxtapositions of event or detail pose moral or political questions about the major characters. Howard Kirk's work-in-progress, *The Defeat of Privacy*, argues that 'the attempt to privatise life is a phenomenon of narrow historical significance' but he tells the student reading the manuscript 'You'd no business to do that. . . . It's private.'⁵ Professor Marvin chooses to go to Edinburgh to lecture on messianism rather than act as host to the controversial Professor Mangel. Indeed, the satiric tone of the novel and the fact that so much of its action is discussed or reported by the characters themselves have the effect of creating not a model of 'everyday' society but an obliquely-related universe of obsessives like that of Ben Jonson's plays. With the telling exception of Barbara Kirk, we learn little directly about the psychic states of the characters, and so it becomes difficult to locate that narrative discourse which might provide the reader with an assigned, unitary position from which a consistent reading of the novel can be constructed or an uncontradictory knowledge of political meaning of the text produced. It's actually very difficult to predict or declare what the final outcome of the novel is. Great care is taken to deny the

³ The original script for the television adaptation also included a cameo of Bradbury playing Bradbury, but this idea was later dropped.

⁴ Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man*, London, Arrow Books, 1977, p 204. First publication by Secker and Warburg, 1975.

⁵ *ibid*, pp 91-92.

⁶ *ibid*, p 230.

⁷ John Ellis, 'Stars/ Industry/Image', to be published in a forthcoming BFI dossier, distinguishes television's conventional immediacy and direct address from the cinema's more ambiguous 'photo-effect'. However, as he usefully observed during the writing of these notes, one of the features of television's literary adaptations is their cinematic aspirations, if only for reasons of cultural prestige. This point may also apply to *The History Man*'s cinematic, rather than televisual, treatment of sex. (See below.)

⁸ *The History Man*, op cit, p 1.

reader a sympathetic figure with whom she or he can identify, and it is only after a number of readings that I've come to see Barbara Kirk as the central figure because her pain is much more than liberal 'angst'.

But the latter is a conclusion one has to work towards, it is not the dominant discourse of the novel. Rather, the novel provides two perspectives on the happenings within it, perspectives which the characters explicitly acknowledge. As the man of history, Howard Kirk judges or rationalises his behaviour from a political standpoint, whereas all the other major characters act, or often fail to act, from a moral one. Because this is a satirical novel, it's pointless to expect that either perspective will be presented with any complexity and Howard's vicious energy is seen as no more culpable than Henry Beamish's ineffectual tolerance. The two perspectives are reworked in minor ways throughout: Kirk's Marxism explains as much about Henry's behaviour as Flora Beniform's Freudianism; accident as an explanation is set against inevitability, and the novel speculates continually about plot and contingency. All these equivocations imply the pluralism which informs the narrative and value systems of the book, down to the ambiguity of its ostensible ending: 'there is a lot that is, indeed, happening, and all the people are fully occupied.'⁶ One could argue that pluralism is the position of intelligibility constructed by the discourses of the novel, but the pluralist position is, if the word means anything, a contradictory one.

'I got excited by the radicalism of the period up to about 1970, and then I got tired or sceptical or doubtful, and the book acquired increasing irony. And the irony was depressing to live with; the irony enriched the book but it left me in a position where I didn't know where my values were. It's a book by a writer whose values are in disarray.'

(Malcolm Bradbury)

Aspects of narrative and character, then, indicate the modernist tendency in Bradbury's fiction, and his treatment of time is another feature marking *The History Man* off from the conventional campus novel and presenting problems for its adaptation. Except for two important chapters the novel is presented in a tense which Bradbury calls the 'historical present'. The effect of this is to make events seem more immediate to our perception, inviting comparison with the experience of watching a film (although the absolute and substantial differences between verbal and visual images are such that the iconicity of photographic images and the 'photo-effect' sense of objects or people being present and absent at the same time point to the crucial differences between the media⁷). The book's present is fixed precisely between Saturday October 7 and Friday December 15. Events on both days are located historically ('McGovern campaigns ineffectually against Nixon'⁸) but the present tense over-rides the date which is, significantly, given great prominence in the tele-adaptation - '1972'. This

temporal ambiguity seems to be an attempt 'to collapse discourse into history, and to naturalise events so that they seem to exist in a space defined from nowhere' as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith says, in arguing that certain novels from Flaubert onwards have been characterisable by such attempts, even when the effect has been the reverse.⁹

⁹ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'A Note on History/Discourse', *Edinburgh '76 Magazine*, p 28.

'I'm not sure the television programme could have been made self-reflexive in the way the book is. The self-consciousness of the novel is self-consciousness about being a novel. How do you get that over into television?'

(Malcolm Bradbury)

Having argued that *The History Man* deviates from the more conventional campus genre, I want to examine how the modernist properties mentioned were accommodated by one of television's more conservative slots, that of the classic serial. Here the dominant convention is that famous novels by long-dead writers are 'faithfully' translated to the screen, and then given extensive critical attention and consequent world sales: a prestige exercise. The critics' reception of the tele-adaptation of *The History Man* certainly seemed to perceive it as such a venture, and the serial's position in the schedules reinforced this view: it appeared in the standard four parts on Sunday night opposite crypto-religious documentaries and Melvyn Bragg's arts magazine, *The South Bank Show*. The classic serial slot encouraged the newspaper columnists to take the adaptation 'literally'—as a hatchet-job on radical academics. (Critics from the left often repeated the argument in aggrieved terms, as the serial coincided with unprecedented cuts in central government funding to the universities.) Even the moribund current affairs programme *Newsnight* managed to join in with an item which linked the adaptation to the sacking of a little-known academic and an obscure debate about literature then taking place in a British university. The response so ignored the modernist properties of the novel as to suggest their absence within the tele-adaptation. But I would argue that this is true only to a limited extent. The critics were able to read the adaptation as a transposition into the form of the classic serial only by ignoring or rejecting some aspects of the programmes themselves.

'I was aware of how easy it was for the Right wing to grab it and say, "At last, somebody is putting down the Left!" And I tried to spike their guns insofar as I could. But it is a slightly rightist view, and it may be that Malcolm is trying to have it both ways when he argues that Howard is not just dangerous, but actually does things.'

(Robert Knights)

The adaptation does indeed dispense with some of the novel's strategies. From the first images, it deliberately rejects the ambiguity about

time and tense in the novel. The opening credits exactly capture a moment in the past where political, sexual and domestic changes all seemed possible: a sub-Lichtenstein montage of images show a fist clenched in salute which suddenly holds a corkscrew. The screwing provokes tears, and women are shown as victims and observers; red wine flows and late '60s guitar chords echo: an image for George Melly's epithet about the period – 'Revolt into Style'. Sustained behind the ironic disclaimer about the University of Watermouth, the date 1972 is given great prominence. The images and sounds also signify a break with the conventional opening of the classic adaptation. Compare them, for instance, with the discreet titles and 'Nunc dimittis' opening of another less naturalistic adaption, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, or the Burgon-baroque overture for that recent varsity serial, *Brideshead Revisited*.

Though the break is only from Art to Pop-Art, this evocation of a past time is important and is sustained. The adaptation's director, Robert Knights, also made some episodes of *The Glittering Prizes* whose period was earlier, and more evident; but the costumes budget was just as much for *The History Man*. Knights was also responsible for the use of music within the serial – Rolling Stones and sitar to suggest the late '60s, Kirk's formative years, and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to indicate sexual pursuit. Conversely, Bradbury's novel contains no mention of specific music, a lack of period reference typical of its equivocal treatment of time.

From Art to Pop-Art:
an image from the
credits of *The History
Man*.



'I hoped that when *The History Man* came out it would make a number of people think: "My god, it can only be eight years ago, and it looks like light years away. It feels like a real period piece." I wanted people to have the feeling that even so short a time ago we had that strong clear sense that got lost in the '70s, of fun and things being able to be changed. We suddenly realised we weren't able to change things by ourselves.'

(Robert Knights)

In comparing novel and tele-adaptation, the critics usually ignored their different dealings with time. If, after almost ten years in the writing, the novel's publication in 1975 was a bit late for an anatomy of the counter-culture, the 1981 serial took a different tack. Its deliberate periodisation was intended to show how the optimism about social change which inaugurated one decade seemed naïve at the beginning of the next. Not, in itself, a particularly radical theme, but nevertheless ignored resolutely by both critics and viewers, who managed to appropriate both texts into an expose of *contemporary* British universities.

In this they may have been assisted by the serial's exclusion of the two chapters in the novel written in the conventional past tense. These deal with the Kirks' emergence as bright, hard-working grammar-school pupils from a working-class background who are politicised by their personal experiences with 1968, 'the year when self-revolutions like the Kirks' turned into a public matter'. Dropping these chapters disturbs the balance, for Barbara Kirk is never seen in the adaptation as Howard's rival and equal whose self-revolution peters out into domestic responsibilities and escapist affairs while he finds a public political stage. Paradoxically, these chapters were omitted because Knights wanted to break with the convention beloved in British drama whereby a character's past has to be brought to the attention of the viewer either through arty flashback or a 'meaningful' conversation about the past. Classic Hollywood avoided these devices and provided a functional past for characters through gesture and telling detail. The adaptation tries this though the Kirks' accents and Howard's occasional gestures, but, generally, the dropping of the chapters from the past produces a *History Man* without a history.

'By the time (the television adaptation) appeared in 1981, instead of being a needling critique of what exists, it is a satirical attack on what has already passed – and therefore can be misused by people who want to take it over from the Right, in order to turn it into an attack on sociology, universities, radicalism, in ways I deeply resented and disapproved of. If I'd known where 1981 was leading I might have doubted whether it should be turned into a television series.'

(Malcolm Bradbury)



More than a spectacle? A post-coital Flora Beniform resumes glasses and notebook.

One of Knights' counter-conventional strategies did cut across the consensus which greeted the serial. Malcolm Bradbury remains doubtful about it, and the *Spectator's* critic called it pornographic. In the novel sexual encounters serve as an extension of the interrogative mode that dominates personal relationships; our attention is kept on the verbal exchanges because of their narrative importance, though we are kept aware of what else is going on. The differences between the encounters are signalled more by the questions asked and answered than by the kind of sex taking place. By contrast, the adaptation emphasised the sex in the sex scenes. The variousness of the sexual relations is foregrounded to develop the women characters: Barbara is shown as passive and uninvolved with Howard; Felicity Phee, his student, is presented as subservient, comic and absurd; and his colleague Flora Beniform offers a cool and elegant matter of factness, the mood of which is caught by the David Hockney tones and compositions cued in by the print on her wall. The final encounter, with English lecturer Annie Callender, has the protagonists adopting the postures of *Last Tango in Paris*, as Howard Kirk's poster reminds us. In some of these scenes the characters are naked.

Knights deliberately went against the convention, no longer operated in cinema, that intercourse shouldn't be indicated but implied, with the discreet fade and the careful angle used if possible. *The History Man's* use of (non-genital) nudity, and the actors' miming of sexual processes

like rhythmic penetration and fellatio, underscored '1972' as an era of experiment and explicitness in sexual matters, one in which the 'personal' was indeed regarded as 'political', and inseparable from other social activities. When Flora Beniform resumes her glasses and notebook but not her clothes, the effect is a bit like that of Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*; the sensational nature of nudity on television is superseded by the sense that a numbers of meanings are in play and that the picture is more than the spectacle. Eventually, the blood will stop rushing in (male?) ears (the auditory metaphor is Knights') and the sense of hearing will return.

'TV critics still tend to review after one episode; they wouldn't do it on the basis of, say, a quarter of *Apocalypse Now*. I moved from a light comedy into a bleaker, harsher, crueller story at the end. I was conscious of doing that over four hours.'

(Robert Knights)

But did it work that way? Most of the reviewers treated these scenes without any reference to their context or to the other social changes implied in the adaptation. Reputedly, some scenes from the BBC's *Sons and Lovers* adaptation which followed soon after *The History Man* row were cut as a result, and the latter programme was not reshow, despite its popularity, in the period when the BBC's licence was under review. 'Certainly the then *New Statesman* critic, Julian Barnes, seemed to believe that sex on television makes you deaf:

*'I don't imagine I was the only viewer who found that when (the producer's) high class artistes were grinding their breasts into that nasty little moustachioed mush, it became quite hard to concentrate on the accompanying dialogue.'*¹⁰

If it worked like this for the *New Statesman*'s Naked Ape, it seems likely that the attempt to defuse the erotic spectacle through the contrast of encounters and their deliberate placing within the concerns of the serial was a miscalculation.

As I've already suggested, the elusive narrative structure of the novel was likely to cause difficulties for a television adaptation. Page of dialogue follows page of dialogue because what matters is less what is done than the characters' self-conscious analysis of it. ('You're a kind of self-made fictional character who's got the whole story on his side just because he happens to be writing it.') And it's through these discussions that the balance between the two world views at issue is attempted and the dominant discourse of pluralism maintained. But unlike novels, television narratives serialised over several episodes tend to subordinate such elements to narrative action or enigmas. (In Barthesian terms, the differences between novel and tele-adaptation are most marked when we see how much emphasis the latter places on hermeneutic and proairetic elements.)

¹⁰ Julian Barnes, 'As For The Sex...', *The New Statesman*, February 20, 1981.

'There is the great thing about inheriting from the previous show until one's got the public from reviews or word of mouth. The audiences went up and up for *The History Man*.'

(Robert Knights)

Two features of the adaptation support this contention. A series of narrative riddle-centres on Carmody, the anti-Kirk student, Professor Mangel, the geneticist whose visit to the University is engineered by Howard Kirk to provoke confrontation, and Barbara Kirk. None of the events are unfolded in a tantalising way in the novel, but in the adaptation we see a Renault mysteriously following Howard's movements; a figure we know to be Mangel out jogging, at home and at work in a laboratory; and Barbara doggedly studying commercial French in order to read Simone de Beauvoir. We anticipate, correctly, that these enigmas will be resolved in the final episode, and two of them are brought together in an event which is entirely a contribution of the adaptation: after Carmody attempts to blackmail Kirk by filming his sexual activities from the mysterious Renault, Kirk negotiates a deal which results in the student's expulsion from Watermouth in exchange for an invitation to Mangel to lecture there. The two meet at the railway station, where Professor Mangel, in avoiding the awkward Carmody's luggage trolley, suffers a fatal heart attack. An accident or the conjunction of two inevitable histories?

Barbara's enigma has a double function. The shots of her alone are unreadable initially, though we are sure that their meaning will emerge and their enigma be resolved, and it is this concern that pulls us through the narrative, as it were, until the final episode. At the same time, because the chapters dealing with the Kirks' earlier life have been dropped, these shots are meant to recover some of the psychological intensity with which she and her tragedy are invested in the novel. In my view, they fail to do this and that failure is a loss attributable more to the demands of television serialisation than to simple misjudgement on the adaptor's or director's part.

The second feature tells us something of the nature of the proairetic or 'action' code in relation to television. In the second episode, Annie Callender says to Howard, 'You're very interesting characters, but I haven't discovered the plot.' I don't think television viewers would have noticed this lack of plot which the novel correctly draws attention to because of the way our view is focussed on Howard as constantly in action, literally plotting. We see him from high angles crossing the campus directly, with only the slightest of deviations; we see him prepare, with swiftness and economy of movement, for the party; we see him at the centre of small groups; and, when scenes are changed through the unusual (for TV) use of wipes, it's usually Howard who is driving or pushing the frame on to the next scene. Although he appears in most of the scenes in the novel, it is as a voice among other voices, constantly elaborating or explaining; on television words become actions.

'Every character is supposed to be an uneasy place of reference.'
(Malcolm Bradbury)

Considering Kirk in this light, however, forces upon us the complex problems of performance and characterisation: what follows when the characters of a highly stylised satire are re-presented as recognisable likenesses of men and women? Both Bradbury and Knights tried to deny readers and viewers secure identification figures who would provide a consistent reference point for the moral and political value structures of their texts. Michael Hordern is cast as the older Oxbridge liberal Professor Marvin, for example, in a considered attempt to offer a character with whom viewers of his generation would initially sympathise. (Hordern, unlike the rest of the cast, was also a famous actor prior to the serial – notably as the liberal philosopher in Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers*.) But in order to criticise his position, Bradbury suggested to script writer Christopher Hampton and Robert Knights that they include in the adaptation a second meeting in the Durkheim Room which Bradbury had rejected from the final version of the novel. In this additional scene the liberals cravenly agree to Howard's blatantly self-serving plan, and Marvin is revealed as the most evasive in a manner that not even Michael Hordern's ingratiating performance can rescue.

'Some people see the characters in the novel as slightly two-dimensional. Some critics have picked up that when you see an actress very much there in three dimensions, it's a different sort of weight. My taste is towards a humanist line rather than a stylised production; I wanted to round out the characters more. It's not naturalism; there are slight jokes like the scene between Howard and Flora out of Hockney. They are gestures and self-reflexive in that way, but I wanted the people and not the style to be right up front.'

(Robert Knights)

The meanings constructed by Hordern's performance, then, don't trouble the balance of the narrative discourses. But Laura Davenport's Annie Callendar seems less susceptible to the strategy. Her function in the narrative structure is to represent liberal, literary values, aware of the challenge of new political ideas and academic disciplines but seeking to evade rather than contradict them. These abstractions are clearly signalled; and, when we see her in bed with Howard in the final scenes, in contrast with Barbara and Felicity who are also shown, she is scarcely a victim. The abstraction embodied here is that mentioned in Bradbury's *Stepping Westward*: 'Someone once defined liberals as people who embrace their destroyers.' But this is only *one* of the meanings generated by the adaptation. When Howard dashes the tea things from Annie's hands and verbally assaults her for the life she has made for herself, my

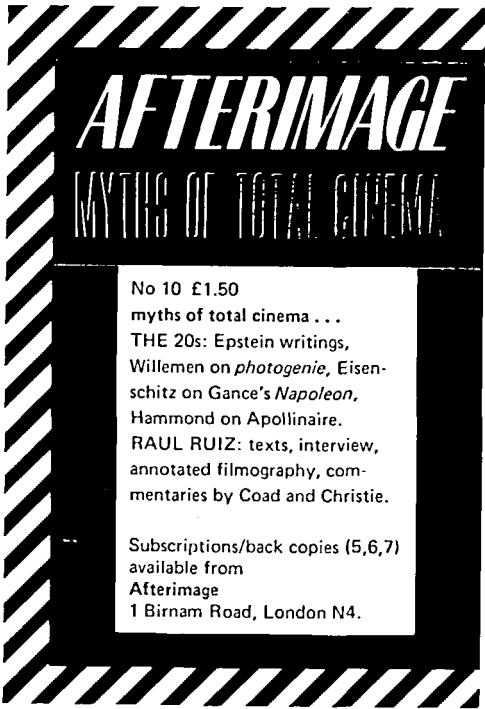
sympathies are engaged by Laura Davenport's performance as a male-oppressed woman, and the sight deafens me to the intellectual argument offered in the other scenes in which she appears. And if the shot were held longer, I think I would forget it altogether.

'Sher's performance, which bears no relation to my image of Howard Kirk, has become compulsive and is now my image.'

(Malcolm Bradbury)

Similar arguments might be constructed about the serial's characterisation of Henry Beamish and about Howard, for Bradbury has himself recognised that Anthony Sher's performance has obliterated his own image of Howard Kirk. The excess of meanings created by performance is probably greater when the adaptation is not from a realist novel or a screenplay written for television: in such a screenplay what a character means is defined by performance, and in the realist novel there is already abundant detail which needs to be omitted so that meanings are clear. But questions about visual representations of verbal style will need to be pursued a great deal more before we are anywhere near a clear understanding of the adaptation of a novel for a visual medium.

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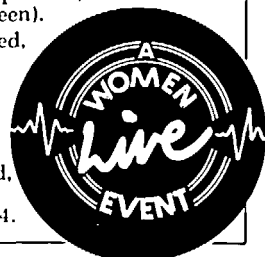
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DESIRE, TRANSGRESSION AND JAMES M CAIN

31

FRANK KRUTNIK FOLLOWS FICTION INTO FILM NOIR

CURRENTLY THERE IS a renewed interest in the fiction of James M Cain (1892-1977), one of the 'hard-boiled' American writers of the 1930s and 1940s. The success of Paramount's 1981 film-adaptation of Cain's most famous book *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (at least the fourth screen version), has generated further activity in film: this year has seen the release of *Body Heat*, overtly based around *Double Indemnity*, and of the first screen version of Cain's 1946 novel *The Butterfly*, and there is also a US television mini-series based on Cain's Civil War novel *Past All Dishonour*. This revival is notable if only because these writings had largely been ignored by Hollywood since the cycle of Cain-adaptations in the mid-'40s – *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) – a cycle that has since been seen to form a significant part of *film noir*.

Although Steve Jenkins, in a short article in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*¹, advocates severing Cain from that rather loosely conceived 'genre' or 'cycle', the writer is chiefly remembered for his influence upon *film noir*, and indeed the recent screen versions play upon Cain's 'Hollywood image' fixed through the *film noir* adaptations. The 1940s versions of *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman* represent adaptations of written fictions which in their sexual orientation in particular seemed almost 'unfilmable' – and indeed, the rights to *The Postman* were acquired by MGM twelve years before the release of their film version. Cain's name connoted scandalous sexuality – both *The Postman* and *Serenade* were banned in Boston, the latter the subject of an unsuccessful prosecution on the grounds of sexual depravity and desecrating religion – and while as a highly successful popular writer, his tales were viable commercial propositions, their narrative dependence upon sexuality presented difficulties in the representational context of 1930s and 1940s Hollywood. Forty years later, a comparative freedom in Hollywood's representation of sexuality eradicates those difficulties, only to present the new adaptations with other problems.

It is with the relationship between Cain's fiction and Hollywood that I will be concerned here, with the 'Cain-text' as an already worked-out, already signifying textual system with a particular coherence in its organ-

¹ Steve Jenkins, 'James M Cain: A Career in Another Key', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1981, vol 48 no 568, p 112.

isation of pleasure and production of meaning, and with the processes involved in the adaptation of this 'Cain-text' to American film (both 'classic' Hollywood and 'New American Cinema').

The Cain-Text (1934-1940)

The textual corpus bearing the name 'James M Cain', which spans five decades (not including his earlier journalistic career and short-stories), displays an apparent diversity, but at its core is a consistent generative problematic—or 'area of concern'—a worrying over the nature of male desire and its relation to female sexuality. The coherence of Cain's work as a text derives from the recurrent, neuralgic repetition around this problematic, which marks even the most seemingly 'deviant' of his fictions. This study will be limited to Cain's first five 'novels'—prior to what is seen as the emergence of *film noir* with *The Stranger on the Third Floor* and *The Maltese Falcon*, prior also to the significant difference marked by Cain's 1941 novel *Mildred Pierce* (which I shall consider below in relation to the Warner Brothers' film version).

These first five 'novels' can be more accurately gauged as 'tales': they have relatively uncomplicated linear narratives, with a short time-span and few characters and settings, and their narratives rely heavily upon suspense to effect the narrative drive for which Cain is noted. They represent the most typical and most influential period of Cain's writing, certainly so in regard to film. For this study, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (1936) are the most typical of the tales; *Career in C Major* (1938) is unusual in its comic inflexion and a lack of extremity which, like *The Embezzler* (1940), enables it to have a 'happy ending'; and *Serenade* (1937) is the closest to a novel in its extended time span and variety of incident, but keeps to the structural dynamics of the other tales. Cain's subsequent work, despite its apparent expansiveness, often presents further reworking of the problematic motivating these tales, most notably in *The Butterfly* (1946) and *The Magician's Wife* (1965)—the latter an almost self-parodic rewrite of *The Postman*.

I, so far as I can sense the pattern of my mind, write of the wish that comes true, for some reason a terrifying concept, at least to my imagination. Of course, the wish must really have terror in it; just wanting a drink wouldn't quite be enough. I think my stories have some quality of the opening of a forbidden box, and that it is this, rather than violence, sex, or any of the other things usually cited by way of explanation, that gives them the drive so often noted... If I do any glancing, it is towards Pandora, the first woman, a conceit that pleases me, somewhat, and often helps my thinking.²

² James M Cain, preface to *The Butterfly*, Pan Books 1981, p 10.

³ Amir M Karimi, *Towards A Definition of the American Film Noir (1941-1949)*, Arno Press 1976, p 85.

The structure of James Cain's stories is usually such that tension and suspense are sustained not by mystery... but by what will happen next, how the relationship of the culprits deteriorates in suspicion and hatred, and how they are punished... The stories begin when the world of their characters has come to an end.³

The quotations above indicate both the motivating problematic of Cain's tales and the resulting 'structure', in terms of narrative and narration (first-person). Cain's remarks suggest the clarity with which he viewed the 'lure' of his fiction, the knowingness, and they also pinpoint the shaping dialectic of the Cain-text, between the 'wish' and the 'terror' engendered by its becoming true.

At the heart of the Cain-text is the 'wish', as 'illicit' desire, most insistently as *incestuous* desire. This is blatantly so in *The Butterfly*, where the woman is initially established as the hero's daughter, and it continually erupts through the early tales, especially in the functioning of the woman in regard to the hero's desire. The trajectory of the narrative in these tales, a narrative centred upon the hero, as 'subjective' nucleus, is the attempt to gratify the wish in the face of the obstacles and forces which constrain it (just as they inspire it).

Cain himself saw his early works as 'intense tales' dealing 'exclusively with one man's relation to one woman' (from the preface to *Three Of A Kind*, 1945). They begin with the eruption of desire at the sight of the woman, an eruption that displaces the hero and locks him within a trajectory leading to transgression – most often through the crimes of adultery and murder, the murder of the woman's husband – and ultimately to catastrophe. Gratification and survival are mutually exclusive, something that is stressed through the fatalism of the first-person narration which continually locates desire as illicit and stresses the 'inevitability' of its repression:

*the reader is carried along by his realisation that the characters cannot have this particular wish and survive, and his curiosity to see what happens next.*⁴

Thus for the 'ideal' reader there are two 'pulls': the engagement by and identification with the wish, and the realisation of its impossibility. The work of the Cain-text consists in holding these two processes together, of elaborating the wish *within* its containment. The incestuous phantasy – a legacy of the repression of desire effected through the Oedipus complex, in particular the repression of bisexuality and the relinquishment of the mother as love object – emerges largely in disguised form: in *The Postman*, Cora is not actually Frank's mother, but the logic of character relations places her in such a position. Fate is invoked at the peak moments of transgression to stress the inevitability of the failure of the wish, to bracket it within a framework which emphasises the strength of the 'real', for the 'wish come true' presupposes a disjunction between the wish and reality.

Hinging then on questions of sexuality, the Cain-text engages in a certain regime of meaning constituting a monolithic 'truth' of sexuality, which rests upon the repression of other sexual organisations. This activity of construction-through-repression is, of course, not specific to the Cain-text, but represents a particular inflexion of the dominant mode of 'novelistic' writing, that based on the narrative mode of the nineteenth-century realist novel.⁵ In the classic realist text, narrative is precipitated

⁴ James M Cain, op cit, p 10.

⁵ see Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, London, Macmillan 1981, pp 39-40, pp 125-128, and p 239.

⁶ see Stephen Heath, *ibid.*, pp 131-144; and 'Film and System: Terms of Analysis' parts 1 and 11, *Screen*, Spring and Summer 1975, vol 16 nos 1 and 2.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, Pelican Books, 1981, p 61.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *ibid.*, p 63.

by an initial disruption of order which generates an enigma, and then moves towards closure through the exhaustion of the elements of this disorder.⁶ This overall movement from disruption to resolution, through a chain of disruptions-resolutions, is channelled through specific narrational/discursive operations. In third-person narration, for example, the location of the reader in regard to the action is achieved especially through the construction of a metadiscourse of Truth, carried by the neutral, impersonal narration (*histoire*, in Benveniste's terminology, events without a speaker) through which other discourses, those of the characters (*discours*, which assumes a speaker and a hearer), are contextualised and measured.

In the Cain-text, the narrative disruption is desire itself, manifested through the hero's reaction to the body of the woman. The first-person narration which dominates, is located in a specific discursive mode of the presentation of the 'truth' of sexuality, the confessional. As Michel Foucault indicates in *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, the confession is 'a ritual of discourse . . . that unfolds within a power relationship'⁷; a relationship that established the reader in position of presumed authority as the one who 'hears' the confession, a positioning that is strengthened by the narratorial direct address. This position of authority is overlaid by, conflated with, the narrative authority: the reader is placed as the arbiter of the Truth (and hence aligned with such figures as Keyes in *Double Indemnity* who narratively carry the discourse of Truth).

Foucault indicates that the long-standing mode of the confessional as an activity of the production of the truth of sexuality has undergone a recent transformation:

*It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done – and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and qualities of pleasure that animated it.*⁸

This is close to the functioning of the Cain-text: the *erotic* drive of the narrative is propelled through a rapid series of brief scenes towards an inevitable conclusion. This series provides a frantic 'imaging' of male desire, which, however, is pinned-down to effect a dominant organisation of sexuality, a discourse of 'masculinity'.

The first-person narration institutes a disjunction between the hero as narrative agent and as narrator: only at the end, the point of closure, is there a contiguous relation between the two, the presentation of events from a unified viewpoint, and the narrative moves inextricably onwards to this point of unification, where all is known. The first-person narration establishes a disjunction for the reader also, as the subject of the narrative statement (*énoncé*) and as the subject of the narration (*énonciation*).

This splitting of subject-position is crucial to the reader's engagement by the text: the narrative-narration moves the reader towards the point of unification, marked by the 'present-tense' of the point of narration, and

this movement is swift, unstoppable and linear, an intractable thrust. 'No one has ever stopped in the middle of one of Jim Cain's books', runs the slogan emblazoned on the front cover of the US Vintage Books editions of Cain. The movement of the Cain narrative is 'straight down the line' (an image from *Double Indemnity*): for the *hero-actant*, once locked into the trajectory of desire, for the *narrator*, under the pressure to get everything confessed and recreated, and for the *reader*, who is caught up in the suspension between the two in the drive towards knowledge and unity of position. Lacking the metadiscourse of third-person narration, the discourse of truth is here carried by the narrative drive itself, in the sustainment of disequilibrium between narrative and narration, and the final resolving of this disequilibrium: caught up in the drive towards unity, the reader 'experiences' the ultimate stabilising of Truth.

The reader's identification with the phantasy that dominates the Cain-text, and the acceptance of the 'reality' that represses the phantasy, involves both locating the woman as the objectified 'other' and the repression of 'femininity' within the hero. The direct address to the *male* reader and the placing of the woman as Body, or 'shape' (which seems to be Cain's favourite word), can be seen clearly in the following examples:

*Brother, if you want to find out how much you think of a woman, just get the idea she's been playing you for a sucker.*⁹

*Then I saw her . . . Except for the shape, she wasn't any raving beauty, but she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in such a way that made me want to mash them in for her.*¹⁰

As the latter extract shows, the hero is immediately engulfed by an aggressive desire which is – in the novel's initial sexual encounter – itself desired by the woman, who literally requests the sexual violence of the hero:

*I took her in my arms and mashed my mouth up against hers . . .
'Bite me! Bite me!'*

*I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth. It was running down her neck when I carried her upstairs.*¹¹

There are two points to be made here: the first concerns the significance of the Cain-text's placement of the woman; the second is related to this and concerns the nature of male desire and the 'masculinisation' that marks the male discourse constituted by the text.

The woman oscillates between dread and desire, between the extremes of the aggressive *femme fatale* and the repository of nurturing, maternal values – an opposition which is conventional in patriarchal representation. In *Double Indemnity* and *Career in C Major* the central woman is characterised as the former, in *Serenade* and *The Postman* the woman is a combination of both but leans towards the latter, and in *The Embezzler* the woman remains an enigma until the end, where she is emplaced as the latter (and *Mildred Pierce* represents the former representation subsum-

⁹ James M Cain, 'The Embezzler', *Double Indemnity* (originally published as *Three of a Kind*, 1945), Corgi Books 1965, p 219.

¹⁰ James M Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Lythway Press, 1972, p 3.

¹¹ *ibid*, p 12.

¹² Sigmund Freud, 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love', *On Sexuality*, Pelican Freud Library, 1977, pp 243-260.

¹³ James M Cain, *Serenade*, Corgi Books 1965, p 131.

ing the latter). But the point about these dominating representations of the woman is that each stresses the crucial *difference* of the woman, her 'otherness'. The woman functions as a fundamental enigma: her desires are in direct opposition to those of the hero (for example, Phyllis' exclusive desire for money in *Double Indemnity*) and the fetishistic representation of the woman – as an assemblage of arousing fragments – marks out her body as a site of disturbance.

An aggressive debasement of the woman in narration and action, and especially in the sexual act, is prevalent in the Cain-text. Freud regarded such debasement in the 'psychology of love' as motivated by the need to deny the incestuous prototype behind the man's chosen love-object.¹² Debasement and idealisation are thus two sides of the same coin, and the Cain-text displays sometimes drastic shifts from one to the other. In *Serenade*, for example, the high point of aggressive debasement is the hero's rape of the woman in a deserted church as a form of sexual revenge ('Whatever it was that she had done to me . . . I was even'), but later in the book there is perhaps the most explicit suggestion of the woman's maternal significance in the whole of the Cain-text:

*And mostly I understood what a woman could mean to a man . . . I thought of books I had read, about worship of the Earth and how she was always called Mother, and none of it made much sense, but those big round breasts did, when I put my head on them, and they began to tremble, and I began to tremble.*¹³

Here the woman is a nurturing maternal Body in which the hero seeks to be immersed, to *return*.

The incestuous phantasy erupts at these 'nervous' points in which the fetishistic representation of the woman as Body *signifies* rather than disavows the troubling of sexual difference which perturbs the Cain-text. Narratively, closure is achieved either through the destruction of the desired object (*The Postman/Serenade/Double Indemnity*) or through the restoration of order through the woman's location in a position of subservience within the family (*Career/The Embezzler*). In either case, the illicit wish is relinquished with the placing of the woman, who serves as the signifier of *male* desire.

It is not just repression of the woman as desiring subject which is crucial for the work of the Cain-text in its organisation of sexuality, but repression also of 'femininity' within men. The Cain-text constructs a dominant male discourse which emphasises aggression over tenderness, activity over passivity, the 'masculine' over the 'feminine'. This consolidation of 'masculinity' necessarily involves the elaboration of that which is transgressive: hence the tenderness of the man in love in *The Postman* and *Serenade*, the sexual insecurity of the hero in this latter tale and in *The Embezzler*, and the threatening emasculation of the hero in *Career in C Major* and *Double Indemnity*.

The sexual work of the Cain-text consists especially in the stabilisation of sexual identity in accordance with gender (and not the 'privileging' of

some pre-existent, secure position). The stressing of the bodily difference of the woman may serve to assert a male/female polarity in these terms, but this does not in itself guarantee a clearcut demarcation of sexual identity. The structuring of 'masculinity' in the Cain-text is itself riddled with contradictions: the aggressive maleness is based on fear of the woman and is directed towards the repression of the woman, but at the same time women are needed as a guarantee of masculinity, are essential to prevent such masculinity from turning narcissistically inwards.

This problem emerges most clearly in *Serenade* which presents its hero as sexually divided, torn between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This conflict between the two sexual forms is represented through the opposed figures of the woman, the Mexican prostitute Juana, and the homosexual impresario Winston Hawes, who are rivals for the hero's love. It climaxes in a confrontation at a party given by Hawes, in the form of a mock bullfight which concludes with toreador Juana killing the 'bull' Hawes with her sword. In the light of Juana's association of intercourse with 'making *toro*', the 'bullfight' here takes on primal connotations, with the hero observing in passive fascination. This scene indicates the Oedipal contextualisation which is general in the Cain-text – in the recurring situation of the murder of the 'husband/father' and the taking of the 'mother' as love-object; but it also demonstrates a readiness to lapse from the structuring of 'masculinity', to imply alternative placements for male desire and to generate an excessive potential which may not totally be re-ordered through the textual homogenisation of Truth. This is not to argue for 'progressive' elements in the Cain-text, but rather to suggest that the nature of its problematic may in itself generate a certain resistance to narrative closure, especially as the field of the 'ideal' reader is relatively narrowly defined.

James M Cain and Hollywood Cinema

The above is an attempt to unpick the text-ure of Cain's fiction in order to indicate its activity in the production of a delimited 'truth' of sexuality – located specifically around the placement of female sexuality in relation to male desire – and to imply the contradictions which the Cain-text seeks to resolve through such activity. In a sense, the 'objective' of the *film noir* is similar – in the definition and delimitation of desire – but certain transformations result from difficulties in translating the Cain-text from writing to film. Firstly, there are problems involved in adapting the sexual subject-matter of Cain's tales. Secondly, as the image is devoid of what Roman Jakobson termed 'shifters' – those personal pronouns which in the written text enable the reader to determine who is speaking – total first-person narration along the lines of the Cain-text is impossible. I will here examine some of the problems involved in adapting Cain's work to '40s Hollywood film by focusing on two which present different forms of adaptation – *Double Indemnity* and *Mildred Pierce*.

Double Indemnity, the first major Cain adaptation, is historically significant in the development of the 1940s erotic/crime thriller, establishing through its rendering of the Cain tale a model for the narrative and narrational structures of subsequent films of its kind. The film retains the general structure and the problematic of Cain's narrative and it succeeds also in retaining the sexual atmosphere through its 'knowing' dialogue (for example, the metaphorical 'speeding' badinage, scripted by Raymond Chandler) and through its highly charged *mise-en-scène*, particularly in the representation of the woman. In the film, as in the novel, it is the hero's meeting with the woman that marks the point of disruption, the eruption of desire. But whereas in the Cain-text the introduction of the woman is bracketed within the first-person narration ('Under those blue pyjamas was a shape to set a man nuts . . .'), the film stresses the *stake* of the disruption.

Walter Neff ('Huff' in the original) enters the Dietrichson home on a routine claims renewal and catches sight of the wife at the top of the stairs, clad only in a bathrobe. The introduction of Phyllis Dietrichson into the narrative disrupts Walter's voice-over narration: he is frozen passively in the act of looking, and when she later walks down the stairs the camera, approximating his look, follows her down, fixing on her legs and especially the anklet decorating one of them (the anklet's fetishistic significance is stressed in the dialogue that follows). As was to become standard in *film noir*, the woman is filmed for her sexuality, often in such a fetishistic mode, and is presented as erotic spectacle.

In an attempt to duplicate the first-person confessional of the tale, the film contains a flashback/voice-over structure, but this does not fulfill the same function as the narration in the Cain-text. Owing to its intermittance and also to the dominance of the image in filmic representation,

Female disruption:
Walter Neff gazes at
Phyllis Dietrichson
in this publicity still
from *Double Indemnity*.



the voice-over does not have the same authoritative hold in the channeling of the discourse of Truth. In *Double Indemnity*, and in *film noir* generally, the image is frequently 'taken over' by the representation of the erotic woman, so that a dislocation emerges between the voice-over and the image, the former failing to contain the latter. This leads to a structural confusion in regard to the control over the discourse of Truth: to compensate, the voice-over is often heavily loaded against the woman, but this does not succeed in overcoming the disruptiveness of the erotic spectacle.

Thus in the film of *Double Indemnity* the sense of threat and male insecurity is much stronger than in the tale, but this ironically tends to stress the point made in the Cain-text, that the hero is a *victim* to desire. The transgressiveness of desire is stressed precisely through the loss of control in the telling of the story: the voice-over commentary oscillates between misogyny, self-pity, and sheer redundancy (in, for example, the obsessive duplication in voice-over narration of information conveyed visually, as in Neff's painstaking pre-planning of the murder).

As a result of the problematising of the place of the controlling male voice, the construction of discourse of Truth is located elsewhere, in the narrative organisation which relies heavily upon repetition, stressing circularity and inevitability – in, for example, the dissolves back from the 'past' to the 'present-tense' of the narration, with Neff dictating his confession into Keyes' dictaphone and his blood-stain spreading, a reminder of the ultimate result of Neff's transgression – and in the film's build-up of the relationship between the hero and Keyes, the claims investigator who functions as a figure of Law. The male world of the insurance business, and the comradeship between the two men (with its developed homosexual implications) acts as a buffer against Neff's self-



Male comradeship:
Walter Neff with
Keyes, the claims
investigator and
figure of the Law.

¹⁴ quoted in Albert J LaValley (ed), *Mildred Pierce* (script and commentary), University of Wisconsin Press, 1980, p 29.

destructive relationship with Phyllis. Further, as in the book, the murder results in Keyes' direct displacement of Phyllis from a position of narrative centrality with the hero. The centrality of Keyes and the idealised step-daughter Lola, a much safer and pro-familial woman, effects a narrative repression of the cold, mercenary Phyllis.

The success of *Double Indemnity* seems to have directly inspired the film versions of *Mildred Pierce* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* by establishing how Cain's tales could be filmed. Jerry Wald, the producer of *Mildred Pierce*, is reputed to have remarked after seeing *Double Indemnity*: 'From now on in every picture I make will be done in flashback'.¹⁴ The film version of *Mildred Pierce*, however, represents a far more extensive mode of adaptation than *Double Indemnity*.

Unusually for Cain's writings, the novel *Mildred Pierce* effects its disturbance through the clash of the woman's narrative centrality with the authorial third-person narration. The hub of the narrative is Mildred's desire to realise her illicit wish – her desire for her daughter Veda and the attempt to make the latter both the realization of her own desires and loved object. This emphasis on female desire locates the novel in the same familial-social milieu as the Hollywood melodrama, but the Mildred-Veda relationship and Mildred's wish are pinned-down continually by the framing authorial *male* commentary, which locates the 'terror' of the wish in Mildred's attempt to take over the role of Father in relation to Veda (through the sexual and economic manipulation of men).

There is a fascinating tension in the novel between Mildred's placement in a narratively similar position to the Cain-text hero – seeking gratification of her illicit wish – and the de-centralising commentary. The heroine combines the functional roles of 'hero' and 'woman', which creates a confusion in 'reading'. This disorder is resolved through a series of rapid 'melodramatic' plot complications which serve to place Mildred back with her weak first husband Bert and to have her discover Veda's treachery when she catches her in bed with her second husband, Monty. Significantly, Mildred's incestuous desire for her daughter is displaced here by the Monty-Veda relationship (they go off to New York together at the end), which has connotations of the incestuous phantasy prevalent in the Cain-text.

Mildred Pierce represents maternity stripped of its idealism: her desire is for a transgressive female identity and she becomes the locus of disturbance in her confusion of sexual roles. This is also the central problematic of the film, the sexual confusion represented through the sexual ambivalence of the figure of Joan Crawford as Mildred: she is a conventional erotic object for men through the repeated fetishisation of her legs, yet in her square-shouldered, angular costume she has a certain 'masculine' appearance. But the film transforms the novel's narrative considerably in its resolution of the problematic, introducing a murder not in the book, organising much more suspense, and contextualising the melodrama material that dominates the novel within a framing *film noir* structure, both narratively and stylistically. Mildred's story is located



Sexual confusion: Joan Crawford in a publicity still from *Mildred Pierce*—an erotic object for men, yet ‘masculine’ in appearance.

within a *film noir* investigation, with Inspector Peterson placed as the arbiter and agent of Truth who demands that Mildred tell her story. The narrative action of the novel becomes the narrated past of the film, narrated by Mildred under pressure from the investigator. Mildred’s discourse is contextualised within the patriarchal discourse carried by Inspector Peterson which fulfills a function comparable to the third-person commentary of the novel.

The generative enigma of Monty’s murder—which through the withholding of a key reverse-shot implicates Mildred as guilty¹⁵—locates her from the start in a position of accountability, and her narration to the police becomes her *confession*. Even though she is ultimately cleared of the *murder*, the confessional presents her desires as illicit, requiring purgation through this ritual of accountability. Mildred’s relationship with Veda at the expense of heterosexual relations, her rise to economic power, and her sexual ambiguity are all marked out as signs of disruptive abnormality, and at the end of the film she is divested of all of these and, as in the novel, reunited with Bert in a position of subservience (represented through the cleaners scrubbing the floor of the Hall of Justice as man and wife walk out into the glorious dawn).

Thus, in the introduction of the flashback/voice-over organisation, in the dominance of the enigma of the murder, and in its framing *film noir* *mise-en-scène*, the film transforms an aberrant Cain book into a much more Cain-like film, to capitalise on the author’s ‘reputation for murder and lurid sexuality’¹⁶ and upon the film of *Double Indemnity* in particular. More rigidly structured than the novel, the film *Mildred Pierce* represses and contains the melodrama material, to insert this within a ‘masculine’ frame of reference. For *film noir* and the Hollywood melodrama are diametrically opposed: the former, with its emphasis on male desire, functioning in a sense as ‘male’ melodrama.

¹⁵ see Joyce Nelson: ‘Mildred Pierce Reconsidered’, *Film Reader* 2, 1977.

¹⁶ Albert J LaValley, *op cit* p 20.

¹⁷ Albert J LaValley, *ibid*, p 13.

¹⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, 'Man Under Sentence of Death: the Novels of James M Cain' in David Madden (ed), *Tough Guy Writers of the 1930's*, Southern Illinois Press, 1968, p 111.

The 1940s film-adaptations of Cain's tales are attempts to render somewhat scandalous books within the acceptable parameters of representation of Hollywood cinema of the time. *Double Indemnity* was so successful an adaptation in this respect that it inspired a number of *films noirs* which overtly re-invested its elements, in regard both to narrative and to *mise-en-scène*: *They Won't Believe Me* and *The File on Thelma Jordan*, for example, seem heavily indebted to *Double Indemnity* and rework the structural dynamics of the Cain-text, while *Human Desire* and *The Prowler* seem variations on the form. Albert J LaValley sees Cain's influence upon *film noir* as even more extensive, finding that 'in an even stronger and more basic sense, Cain's novels acted as a shaping influence on the whole *noir* tradition' and that Cain's works 'antedate much of *film noir*'s themes and methods'.¹⁷ As an input into *film noir*, Cain's 'shaping influence' can be seen in particular in establishing a narrative mode significantly different from the investigative mood often seen as definitive of *film noir*, and represented especially through the film-adaptations of Raymond Chandler's novels.

The investigative narrative in *film noir* is usually generated by a murder, and through the activity of the investigator (either a private eye, an institutional investigator, or a personally interested individual) there is a movement towards the establishment of narrative Truth from a bewildering web of motives and obstacles. Often the investigator's quest is sidetracked by the woman, who becomes the new centre of the hero's investigation, and it is their relationship which determines the narrative resolution, especially the establishment of the woman's guilt or innocence.

Conversely, the Cain-mode stresses sexuality from the start, sexuality that is intrinsically related to violence and disorder, and it features a much more precarious hero, a lapsed hero who is subject to internal as well as external pressures – the latter a seeming result of the former. In such films, as Joyce Carol Oates remarked of Cain's fiction, 'it is as if the world extends no further than the radius of one's desire'.¹⁸ Frequently these films have the confessional structure, dense fatalism and narrative drive of the Cain-text – manifestations of the generative conflict between illicit desire and prohibition. Both structures can be present in the same film – the most notable example being *Out of the Past*. But most often, as *Mildred Pierce* illustrates in its distinction between the discourses of Inspector Peterson and Mildred – the investigator and the confessor – their particular narrative structurings of desire and Truth are mutually exclusive.

Recent Adaptations

The recent spate of Cain adaptations are the latest in a series of 'New American' films dating from the early 1970s which evoke the '40s *film noir* (e.g. *Chinatown* and *Farewell, My Lovely*). *Body Heat* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* retain much of the Cain-text in their narra-

tive structures, but there is a dissipation of the intense, claustrophobic atmosphere of the original *film noir*, the insistent 'terror' of the wish. Judith Williamson has linked this with

*the shift in representation (which) . . . has been an attempt to show more and more sex, while holding it up as the great naughty secret. This contradiction becomes ridiculous in the new film noir – for how can a film simultaneously suggest that something is out of bounds while flaunting its explicit inclusion?*¹⁹

¹⁹ Judith Williamson, 'Consuming Passions', *City Limits* no 16, 1982, p 37.

²⁰ a line from the RKO film *They Won't Believe Me*, 1947.

The prohibitions on the representation of the sexual act in 1940s American cinema produced in the *film noir* a hyper-charging of its signifying operations: the sexuality which could not be explicitly shown was implied through looks, through the delirious visual style, through obtuse, metaphorical dialogue, through perverse and contradictory characterisation, and through the cycle's characteristic *mise-en-scène*. This covertness of sexuality testified to the 'terror', to the danger of illicit desire, the explosiveness of which was represented especially in the body of the woman:

*She looked to me like a very special kind of dynamite, neatly wrapped in nylon and silk. Only I wasn't having any. I'd been too close to an explosion already. I was powder-shy.*²⁰

The new *films noirs*, as Williamson suggests, show much more 'explicit' sexuality. They insert sex into the centre of the narrative and the centre of the image, and at the same time celebrate this 'honest' re-insertion, the new 'freedom', the 'adult' acceptance of sex – from the foregrounding of incest in *Chinatown* to the sex scenes in *Body Heat*. But there is a tension here between this new 'freedom' and the forties *film noir* conventions that are retained – for the latter arose precisely through the impossibility of representing sexuality.

For example, in the 1981 *Postman* there is the same rhyming of events – two murder attempts, two car accidents. Similarly, this recent adaptation retains the book's multiple generation of cat images (associated in the latter with Cora's 'wild' sexuality): the cat that foils the first murder attempt, the lawyer Katz, the puma woman. But in this film there is no point to these retentions from the novel (which are part of the Cain-text's fatalistic repetition), for there is a total dissipation of the novel's narrative drive and no attempt to duplicate its first-person narrator. Instead, these retentions serve as window-dressing, associating, through 'faithfulness' to the original – and in contrast to the 1947 MGM version of *The Postman*, which plays down the sensuality – the 'explicit' sexuality of the film with the reputation of Cain. (In fact, the novel stops just before the sexual act, or cuts away, or refers to it in some terse, withdrawing phrase).

In the 1981 *Postman*, the sexual scenes – like the representation of the erotic woman in the forties *film noir* – halt the narrative and exist for the

sake of spectacle. Remarkable here is the 'grubbiness' of the film's sexual scenes – slobbish unshaven Jack Nicholson, the clumsy coupling on the table, the association of sex with dirt – which contrasts pointedly with the 1946 version and its radiant cleanness. There is also no engagement with the narrative tension of the wish/terror dialectic, but rather a sense of cool detachment, not only in regard to narrative, but also to spectacle – in the sexual scenes and in the nostalgic period recreation of style (reminiscent of another 'New American' film remake, Robert Altman's *Thieves like Us*). A clear example of the confusion pin-pointed by Judith Williamson is revealed by the film's ending: Cora is killed in a car crash, but the film closes on Frank by the roadside, with no sense of his imminent punishment by the court he once escaped – the postman's second ring. This characteristic 'open-ending' of New American Cinema – like the recent film's elision of the elaborate courtroom plotting which dominates both the 1946 version and the novel – plays down the power of Law fundamental to both *film noir* and the Cain-text.

This paper is an abridged version of a lengthy study of the Cain-text and its relation to *film noir*.

Sexual 'explicitness':
a grubby coupling
from the 1981 re-
make of *The Postman
Always Rings Twice*.



FILM ADAPTATIONS OF THE FICTION OF JAMES M CAIN

She Made Her Bed Paramount 1934 (based on story *The Baby in the Kebab*)
Wife, Husband, Friend 20th Century Fox 1939 (based on *Career in C Major*)
When Tomorrow Comes Universal 1939 (based on story *The Modern Cinderella* later rewritten as *The Root of His Evil*, but also incorporating scenes from *Serenade*)
Le Dernier Tourant Gladiator (France) 1939 (based on *The Postman Always Rings Twice*)
Money and the Woman Warner Brothers 1940 (based on *The Embezzler*)
Onesie I.C.I. Italy 1942 (based on *The Postman Always Rings Twice*)
Double Indemnity Paramount 1944

Mildred Pierce Warner Brothers 1945
The Postman Always Rings Twice MGM 1946
Everybody Does It 20th Century-Fox 1949 (remake of *Wife, Husband, Friend*)
Serenade Warner Brothers 1955
Slightly Scarlet RKO 1956 (based on *Love's Lovely Counterfeit*)
Interlude Universal 1957 (remake of *When Tomorrow Comes*)
Interlude Domino (Great Britain) 1968 (remake of *When Tomorrow Comes*)
Double Indemnity ABC-TV 1973
The Postman Always Rings Twice Paramount 1981
Body Heat Warner Brothers 1982 (based around Paramount's 1944 *Double Indemnity*)
Butterfly Par-Par 1982

WHOSE BRECHT? MEMORIES FOR THE EIGHTIES

A CRITICAL RECOVERY BY
SYLVIA HARVEY

BRECHT DIED IN 1956, the year of Hungary and of Suez; his writings and his ideas have continued to circulate, to be remembered and used in a variety of ways within Western culture throughout the following two decades. But if we wish these ideas to have a life and a currency for the 1980s we must firstly clarify the ways in which Brecht's times – and therefore his experience and his work – were different from our own; and secondly we must unravel the multi-coloured threads of those readings and re-readings of Brecht that placed his ideas in a new context, that of the unfolding of new theories of culture and cultural production as these developed in the West in the 1970s. Our recovery of Brecht will thus be a complex process of remembering through the recollections of others, and it will entail, at points, a critique of those other memories.

Brecht Then and Now

Our starting point must be the recognition that Brecht in aiming 'to apply to the theatre the saying that one should not only interpret but change the world' worked to produce cultural forms, to unleash energies and criticisms, visions and stories, appropriate for his own times, and that times have changed. His experience crosses the two peaks of an enthusiastic commitment to the struggles of a German left building for itself mass political support in the late 1920s and early '30s, and the quieter, rather more subdued and contradictory but nonetheless principled commitment to the communist government of East Germany in

¹ The experience of these times is expressed vividly in many of Brecht's poems; see, for example, 'To Those Born Later', Bertolt Brecht, *Poems*, Part Two 1929-38, and 'Bad Times', *Poems*, Part Three 1938-56, ed J Willett and R Mannheim, London, Eyre Methuen 1976.

² 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre*, ed J Willett, London, Eyre Methuen, 1978, p 185. For Brecht's discussion of pleasure in learning, see 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction', *Brecht on Theatre*, pp 69-76.

³ See Louis Althusser, 'On the Materialist Dialectic', *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster, London, Allen Lane, 1969. The debate about knowledge and scientific method has been developed by E P Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London, Merlin Press, 1978 and by Perry Anderson in *Arguments within English Marxism*, London, New Left Books, 1980.

the 1950s. These peaks are separated by the difficult years, the 'bad times' of fascism and exile from 1933 to 1948.¹ Our own times have, in Britain, their own particular difficulties: a crisis of profitability, de-industrialisation, mass unemployment and a sustained attempt at dismantling both the ideology and the structure of the Welfare State. These factors provide a distinctive framework for both our criticism and our cultural production, and we may learn something from Brecht's attempt at constructing a new culture appropriate for his times only if we are clear about some of the changes of approach and emphasis, together with some of the new social phenomena, that characterise the post-war period.

Firstly, Brecht's commitment to socialism and his search for a cultural equivalent to that commitment is difficult to recover today. For our age has not only inherited the language and some of the ideologies of the Cold War, but has also accumulated difficult and contradictory knowledge about the actual historical practices of socialism. The choice between 'socialism or barbarism', a choice that seemed clear to so many in the '30s, became less clear in the post-war period. Moreover, the discourse of the western mass media (paralleled by mistakes and diversions in the working class movement itself) has imparted to the vocabulary of 'communism' and 'class struggle' such negative connotations that Brecht would have been among the first to hunt for new ways of speaking old truths. We have an additional, historically accrued disadvantage that the dominant and carefully constructed image of socialism is of something (and it is seen as a 'thing') dreary, drab, repressive and boring. Our difficult responsibility is not simply to replace this image with another, but to embark on those new practices that might give force and substance to the representation of a lived experience of communalism and creativity in our cinema, theatre, poetry.

Secondly, Brecht's writings, like those of many of his contemporaries, are marked by a strong belief in the value of science. It is a belief that expresses a strong pride and pleasure in the possibilities for human advancement opened up by the new age of science. In the 'Short Organum for the Theatre' (1948) he equates the scientific attitude with a pleasurable and change-oriented form of learning; this attitude looks at the 'how' and the 'why' of reality, and asks how things could be different; it proposes the transformation of nature and social reality:

*The attitude is a critical one. Faced with a river, it consists in regulating the river; faced with a fruit tree, in spraying the fruit tree. . . . faced with society, in turning society upside down.*²

The emphasis here on change and on practice separates this cluster of ideas from later definitions of the category of science (considered as a mode of knowing or a 'theoretical practice') associated in the '60s with the work of Louis Althusser.³ For Brecht, science stands both for the possibility of exact and certain knowledge of the natural and social world and for the *mastery* of nature and human history. In this latter respect it

is linked to that sort of optimistic and teleological marxism of the 'iron laws of history' that is rather more characteristic of the 1930s than of our own time.

Thirdly, we can measure the distance between Brecht's world and our own by looking at the ways in which his ideas about cultural production were determined by the circumstances in which he found himself. In the late '20s his support for and identification with the German Communist Party, a party receiving mass support and leading one of the most highly organised workers' movements in Europe, offered him a place within and the possibility of working for a popular left-wing culture. His was not, at that time, the position of those in the post-war West who were to be accused of cultural isolationism, of elitism or vanguardism, of 'preaching to the converted' (a phrase that almost always assumes the 'converted' are a fringe minority). It is the majority, working people, the poor and the oppressed, who are the imagined interlocutors of, for example, his poems. Thus he writes:

*Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry
Of wonderful times to come.*

'Those Who Take the Meat from the Table'

*General, your bomber is powerful...
But it has one defect:
It needs a mechanic.*

'General Your Tank is a Powerful Vehicle'⁴

Today the absence of a mass left movement is matched by the dominance of systems of mass communication, and by the cultural effects, for dissident groups, of fragmentation, ghettoisation, marginalisation.

This process of cultural fragmentation or ghettoisation can, however, be considered in its positive aspect. For one of the most distinctive phenomena of the last twenty years has been the emergence of new social movements based upon the recognition of various forms of social oppression not solely explicable in terms of the categories of 'class' and 'exploitation'; among these can be counted the movements for black liberation, for women's and gay liberation, as well as the many anti-imperialist national liberation movements. A crucial question for cultural theory in the 1980s will be the extent to which these vigorous but often rigorously self-enclosed cultures exist as an *alternative* or in *opposition* to mainstream and dominant culture. To what extent might these dominated cultures, and those who produce the means of expression for them, transform the social totality?

If this has seemed like a digression, circling at a great distance around the question of 'Brecht and film theory', it has been a digression designed to establish the conditions from which we make our raid upon the past, and the circumstances in which we embark upon our purposeful reading of Brecht. The following section will briefly examine the ways in which those forms of film theory committed to the general principle of 'polit-

⁴ *Poems*, Part Two, op cit, p 287, 289, 295.

ical modernism' have taken up and transformed certain Brechtian formulations. It should be added that the purpose of this process is not to uncover the 'real Brecht', to establish the 'authorised version', but rather to investigate and of course to comment upon some of the 'variants'.

The 'Politics of Form': Film Theory in the 1970s

Beneath the imprecise, often confusing slogan of the 'politics of form' many of the central and recurrent debates of film theory in the '70s struggled to establish a conceptual framework that might link the analysis of the formal properties of the film text to an understanding of its social mode of existence. This long dream of uniting or relating semiotic and ideological analysis, together with a desire on the part of some practitioners to combine a radical aesthetic practice with radical social effects, has resolved itself, or condensed itself into the term 'political modernism'. This 'political modernism' (whether the term is used as such or merely implied in a mode of argument) has served as the arena in film theory within which the aesthetic quarrel of the century, that between 'Realism' and 'Modernism', has unfolded. For a sense of this debate's continuity as a painfully live issue, we need only refer to the recent exchange in this journal between Peter Wollen and Timothy Clark. Wollen argues that Clark's article on Manet's painting *Olympia* amounts to

*an attempt to undermine the whole paradigm of modernism and, specifically, the aesthetics of its radical avant-garde sector. This surely is to turn one's back on the whole history of political art in this century...*⁵

In the course of the same argument Brecht's work is invoked – the often spoken name of the great fellow traveller, whether the talk has been of Godard or Straub, Sirk or Oshima, Eisenstein or British Independent Cinema – and a useful, brief summary is offered of what is taken to be Brecht's position:

*Brecht described many times why a traditional form of realism was inadequate as the sole or privileged form of oppositional art... it tended to be local rather than global... it favoured the actual rather than the possible and the observable rather than the unobservable. It was descriptive rather than explanatory. It effaced contradiction.*⁶

While the concept of 'realism' clearly requires closer investigation, two comments might be useful at this stage. Firstly, there is, here, a tendency to equate political art with modernism. In addition, political art' seems to include the unspoken term 'European' or 'Western'; it might not be applicable to developments in Cuba or Chile or Senegal. While we certainly cannot make a sudden and easy 'escape' by looking elsewhere, we are the products of our particular cultural history but not its prisoners; we can learn from and draw upon other traditions, other histories. This is the value of the 'knight's move' – Viktor Shklovsky's

⁵ Peter Wollen, 'Manet – Modernism and Avant-garde', *Screen*, Summer 1980, vol 21, no 2, p 25. See also T J Clark, 'Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of *Olympia* in 1865', *Screen*, Spring 1980, vol 21, no 1, pp 18-41, and T J Clark, 'A Note in Reply to Peter Wollen', *Screen*, Autumn 1980, vol 21, no 3, pp 97-100.

⁶ *ibid.*, p 23.

term which we might apply to unexpected, non-linear developments in the history of art. Secondly, it is unclear from this particular formulation of Brecht's position whether 'traditional realism' is seen to be inadequate in itself or only inadequate if it struggles alone in the general cultural arena of oppositional art. The fundamental question here, of course, revolves around the definition of 'realism'; is it descriptive of a particular style, or indicative of a general, philosophical approach to the world and to knowledge?⁷

Just as there is more at stake in the debate about realism than questions of style, so too the term 'political modernism' involves not only textual properties but also extra-textual relations: Thus, for Brecht, the text itself is deliberately 'imperfect', or, as in more recent terminology, it has 'gaps' or 'spaces'; it leaves a space for the spectator to enter and thereby complete the work. The text is structured in such a way as to invite the participation of the audience; its elements are juxtaposed in a way that entails the active co-operation of the reader:

*The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement.*⁸

It is an idea about textual construction that has gained considerable subsequent currency to the point where, in certain sorts of critical writing, it becomes a requirement of radical film making:

*This repeated breaking of the flow is one of the most essential aspects of political film-making (allowing the reader to construct a critical reading of the text as it unfolds . . .)*⁹

This 'double directional' process, a set towards the text and a set towards the reader, is the central feature of 'political modernism'.¹⁰ It is, moreover, this particular clustering of concerns that explains the recurrent fascination with Brecht in the writings of so many cultural theorists. The work of Brecht is seen to give birth to a new aesthetic: the text is changed so that the nature of its relationship with the audience may also – in a distinctive and qualitative fashion – be changed.

The impetus among film theorists of the post-'68 generation to return, again and again, to those principles of cultural production outlined by Brecht can be traced to two sources. Firstly, it can be pursued through an increasing interest in the work of Godard and his radical re-working of film language to the general impact of modernism on film making and on film criticism.¹¹ Secondly, we can identify this 'return to Brecht' in an increasing interest in the relationship between cultural production and social change, and the accompanying search for the protocols of a radical art. It may be useful from this point to examine the recovery of Brecht in the '70s in terms of this interest in modernism and in radical aesthetics, but also in terms of three of the central preoccupations of film theory in this period: the concern with *realism*, with *signification* and with *subjectivity*.

⁷ For a discussion of realist epistemology see Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure*, London, British Film Institute, 1980.

⁸ 'A Short Organum', *op cit*, p 201.

⁹ C Johnston and P Willemen, 'Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film', *Screen*, Winter 1975-76, vol 16, no 4, p 107.

¹⁰ For discussions of the 'reader-text' relationship see J M Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans Ronald Vroon, Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1977; and *The Reader in the Text*, ed S Suleiman and I Crosman, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1980.

¹¹ It is not possible to trace here the implications of the much-delayed impact of modernism on cinema; modernist practices had transformed methods of representation some 40 years earlier in European painting and literature.

¹² For publication details see Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans Anna Bostock, London, NLB, 1977, and Bertolt Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukacs', *New Left Review*, No 84, March-April 1974, reprinted in E Bloch et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, NLB, 1977.

¹³ Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism. History, Doctrine*, The Hague, Mouton, 1955.

¹⁴ Extracts from *Lef* and *Novy Lef* were published in *Screen*, Winter 1971-72, vol 12, no 4. The connection between *Lef* and Brecht is minimally established on the basis of Brecht's friendship with Tretyakov. Brecht wrote a poem for Tretyakov, 'Recommendation', *Poems*, Part Two, op cit, p 250; see also W Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht', *Understanding Brecht*, London, New Left Books, 1977, p 108, and S Tretyakov, 'We Raise the Alarm', *Screen*, Winter 1971-72, vol 12, no 4, pp 68-73.

Brecht's conversations with the critic Walter Benjamin only became generally available in English in 1973, the seminal essay 'Against Georg Lukacs' in 1974; even in German they only became generally available in 1966 and 1967 respectively¹². So the great 'Brecht-Lukacs' realism debate of the 1930s was not publicly available at that time; it is our generation that has witnessed it in one of those historical moments when dead letters and silenced voices are brought to life again. Of course it was not the 'magic' of finding lost documents that gave Brecht's ideas their particular force and currency in the '70s, but a particular and complex conjunction of critical attacks upon Stalinism and upon 'Socialist Realism', together with a corresponding advocacy of experimentalism in aesthetics and modernism in particular, and the discovery of the 'lost' left precursors or practitioners of literary and cinematic modernism: the Russian formalists and futurists of the 1920s. Despite the availability, since 1955, of Victor Erlich's magnificent study of Russian formalism,¹³ it was not until the publication of English translations from the journals *Lef* (1923-25) and *Novy Lef* (1927-28) in the early '70s that this particular conceptual tradition entered film studies.¹⁴

The most obvious point of connection between the Russian futurists of the '20s and Brecht lies in their shared approach to specifying the relationship between aesthetic form, social reality and social change. While Lukacs vehemently defended a particular *style* of realism, that associated with the nineteenth century realist novel, Brecht and the futurists argued that the question of realism could not be settled for all time on the grounds of style: 'In no circumstances can the necessary guidelines for a practical definition of realism be derived from literary works alone.'¹⁵ Rather, realism involved an attitude to social reality, and the task of the artist was not to adhere to particular stylistic conventions, specifiable in advance, not to 'cling to "tried" rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws', but to 'render reality to men in a form they can master'.¹⁶

The test of the usefulness and validity of an aesthetic form lay not in its relationship to particular aesthetic recipes (whether these were 'realist', or, we might now add 'modernist'), but in its appropriateness for the representation of social reality at a particular moment in time. It was for this reason that Brecht wrote:

*Literary forms have to be checked against reality, not against aesthetics – even realist aesthetics.*¹⁷

Whether the canons have been those of 'realism' or those of 'modernism' it has proved easier for some producers and critics to adhere to them than to search for

*faithful images of life...discovering the causal complexes of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power...*¹⁸

Brecht was not an advocate of formal experiment for the sake of experiment, and was occasionally sardonic about the role of the avant-garde:

*For a vanguard can lead the way along a retreat or into an abyss. It can march so far ahead that the main army cannot follow it, because it is lost from sight...*¹⁵

His defence of innovation was linked to his search for those forms which, as far as possible, offered an adequate representation of reality from the point of view of, and on behalf of, those social forces struggling to change that reality. So art had to change, not because the consumers buy that which is 'new and different', but because reality itself was changing. It is in this sense that Brecht still claims for himself the general nomenclature of realism, and film theorists who have placed him within the 'anti-realist' camp would be more exact if they called him 'anti-illusionist' and not 'anti-realist'. Negotiating these terms can be a hazardous process compounded by the tendency of a single word to stand in for a variety of often conflicting meanings. But once we are clear that for Brecht the term realism involved questions of epistemology, not questions of style, we may see why it is that he is a realist, but not a realist in Lukacs' sense of that word:

Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists.

*For time flows on. . . Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change.*²⁰

In one of those odd reversals of history, some of the anti-realist theorists of the '70s made a mistake very similar to that of Lukacs: they tended to assume that texts could be defined as 'radical' on the basis of stylistic properties alone, rather than on the basis of the tripartite relationship between textual properties, contemporary social reality and historically formed readers. It is the engagement with *knowing* the world in order to represent and transform it that is central to Brechtian aesthetics. This process of knowing is to be understood as historical in the sense that it involves the questions 'by whom?', 'for whom', 'under what circumstances?', and a sensitivity to the problem of access – whether to particular sorts of buildings or to particular sorts of discourses.

In addition, Brecht's realism already involves a certain theory of signification. For while language or 'human discourse' are of a categorically different order from 'reality' (in this sense language could never be perfectly adequate to the real), nonetheless the impulse to transform reality itself and not simply its representations entails a realist epistemology, a correspondence theory of knowledge and language. It is Brecht's interest in changing the world that (notwithstanding the specifically sensuous and non-cognitive properties of art) leads him to an aesthetic grounded in a realist epistemology, and, by implication, to a belief that language with its both generalising and referential properties can

¹⁵ 'Against Georg Lukacs', *Aesthetics and Politics*, op cit, p 76.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p 81.

¹⁷ *Brecht on Theatre*, op cit, p 114.

¹⁸ 'Against Georg Lukacs', op cit, p 80, p 82.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p 72.

²⁰ 'Against Georg Lukacs', op cit, p 82.

produce valid knowledge of reality, or, more precisely, of the social world. Such a realist epistemology is, therefore, both to be separated from certain forms of discourse theory and to be distinguished from any particular set of stylistic recipes.

2) SIGNIFICATION

It was Brecht's theorisation of the techniques or 'signifying practices' of epic theatre that allowed his work to be recruited for the modernist cause in contemporary film theory. For Brecht's epic theatre is anti-naturalist and anti-illusionist, a theatre of investigation and analysis, a theatre of ideas that produces generalisations from the particular, and abstract knowledge from the concrete. From the point of view of modernist theory it is also a theatre that is in certain ways conscious of itself as signifying practice, and that draws attention to its own means of production, its own processes of representation. This latter quality of self-reflexivity largely derives from the devices of distanciation or alienation. Through both the development of certain techniques of acting and of an episodic method of plot construction ('each scene for itself' rather than 'one scene makes another'²¹), the means or mechanics of representation are foregrounded, the audience becomes aware of the drama as one possible representation or account of reality. This foregrounding of devices, however, is not so much designed to produce a sense of aesthetic 'play'—that particular sort of aesthetic pleasure which is offered to highly educated audiences on the basis of a recognition of the transgression of certain aesthetic codes and taboos. Rather it proposes to offer the audience a place from which it can develop its own criticism of and judgement upon the actions represented. The problem with the process of distanciation, of course, is that the audience needs to be distanced in order to exercise its critical faculties, but not too far—it must not be so distanced as to lose interest. Similarly the invitation to participate in the work of producing the meaning of the play or film must be perceived as a pleasant invitation and not as a sentence to 90 minutes of hard labour. Brecht tries, in his advocacy of particular techniques, to hold in balance the three factors: distanciation, a foregrounding of the means of representation, and an invitation to the audience to make their own critical assessment of the actions represented:

²¹ 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre*, op cit, 37.

*As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement.*²²

²² 'A Short Organum', op cit, p 201.

This process of 'noticing the knots' or of foregrounding the means of representation has been a familiar one in modernist theory and practice since the time of the cubists. What modernist art offers the spectator is

not the impression, reflection or illusion of reality, but a sense of those very processes of representation through which reality is mediated to us in artistic form. The sudden magic of the signified is displaced from us, eludes our grasp, as we understand it to be the product of a particular process of signification, the product of a particular 'way of seeing'. But it must be said that for a political modernism this process of displacement cannot take place within the general framework of philosophical relativism (one way of seeing is as good as another way of seeing and is judged according to criteria of internal coherence). Rather, it must operate within the framework of a realist epistemology and a correspondence theory of knowledge. Brecht's work is not only concerned with the difficulty of representing the world, but also with the vital necessity of knowing it. His theory of distanciation and of the 'separation of the elements'²³, like the cubists' refusal of the single point perspective rendering the illusion of a three dimensional world, can be seen to involve a recognition of the materiality of discourse, but this recognition never floats free from the activity of a discourse referring outside itself, beyond the immediate discursive system. So a productive tension is maintained, and must be maintained in any political modernism, between the act of representation and a sense of the 'that to which the representation refers'. Such a tension is further complicated by the ways in which the work itself aims to open up new sets of possibilities for its readers or spectators (its 'public'), spectators whose interest in changing the world takes them beyond an interest in seeing it represented.

If any properly social consideration of the processes of signification entails questions of referentiality and effectivity, it also involves an analysis of the audience's pleasure in reading and an understanding of the institutional forms within which the acts of 'reading' or 'consumption' take place (what Brecht called the question of the 'apparatus').

Brecht's ideas about pleasure in the theatre (they cannot really be described as a theory of pleasure) are diverse. At times 'pleasure' entails entertainment, humour, wit, fun ('a theatre that can't be laughed in is a theatre to be laughed at'²⁴), at others it seems a conceptual, cognitive matter, involving signification ('Pleasure comes from giving meaning to things'²⁵). Brecht argued for the necessity of defending the epic theatre 'against the suspicion that it is a highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair'²⁶, and urged its development as a place of entertainment, a place for enjoyment; a place of lightness and ease, quickness and wit:

... our playing needs to be quick, light, strong... We must keep the tempo of a run-through and infect it with quiet strength, with our own fun. In the dialogue the exchanges must not be offered reluctantly, as when offering somebody one's last pair of boots, but must be tossed like so many balls.²⁷

It is these elements of 'ease', of 'lightness of touch' and of humour that seem not to have been taken up in that European modernist tradition which includes the cinema of Straub, Huillet, Godard and some English

²³ 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre*, op cit, p 37.

²⁴ *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1965, p 95.

²⁵ Stephen Heath, 'Lessons from Brecht', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15, no 2, p 115.

²⁶ 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction', *Brecht on Theatre*, op cit, p 72.

²⁷ *Brecht on Theatre*, op cit, p 283.

²⁸ It should be noted, however, that the work of these film-makers can generate humour for an audience with access to a specialist range of literary and cinematic references; the particular limitations that class position and educational experience place upon the recognition of humour have been insufficiently explored.

²⁹ 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction', op cit, p 74.

³⁰ 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', op cit, p 34.

³¹ *ibid*, p 34.

³² *Understanding Brecht*, op cit, 102.

independent film-makers of the '70s.²⁸ What is, of course, often so difficult to resolve in practice is a 'lightness of touch' with seriousness of purpose, the telling of jokes in and about a world that is no joke. This 'lightness' of touch should not be confused with a superficiality of approach, and the cultural producer has an enormously difficult task in attempting an account or analysis of a complex social reality ('The foundation of... a business like Standard Oil is a pretty complicated affair, and such things cannot be conveyed just like that.'²⁹). Brecht's point, perhaps, is that the end product of such hard work by the producer should convey a sense of ease and clarity, a sense also of delight at seeing something clearly or seeing something afresh, at seeing 'natural' or 'commonplace' events in a new light. A weighty combination of self-reflexive discourse and dense analysis has made some of the works of political modernism too heavy to ride the waters of general or pleasurable consumption; they have sunk to the silent and submarine depths where only the sharks of cultural theory cruise the waters. But these works of the recent past are still needed to build a cultural future, their various approaches to the problems of representation and analysis need to be drawn upon, recovered, renewed and adapted for a more general circulation.

If the work of signification and the construction of radical texts cannot be considered apart from the question of pleasure, the circulation of these texts cannot be considered apart from the question of institutions. In a post-war world dominated by systems of mass communication and by accompanying theorisations of 'one dimensionality' or of the 'closure of the universe of discourse', Brecht's earlier investigations of institutional relations or of the 'apparatus' are intriguing but inadequate. Both Brecht and Benjamin grasped and expressed the need to change both the existing relations of cultural production and the existing means of cultural consumption. Brecht specified the ways in which the primary social function of the existing cultural apparatus, that of 'providing an evening's entertainment'³⁰, largely determined the nature of the work exhibited by the apparatus, and he criticised the naive or muddled thinking of certain cultural producers:

*For by imagining that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact has got hold of them they are supporting an apparatus which is out of their control. ... Society absorbs via the apparatus whatever it needs in order to reproduce itself.*³¹

Benjamin argued that it was the task of the cultural producer to make the cultural apparatus a terrain of struggle and thus to move towards the transformation of the social function of the institution. Thus he argued that the producer must transform himself

*from a supplier of the production apparatus, into an engineer who sees his task in adapting that apparatus to the ends of the proletarian revolution.*³²

Of the two sets of formulations Benjamin's is perhaps the most hopeful for present practice. The danger of Brecht's formulation is that it presents the institution as absolutely determining and containing any of the possible voices of dissent. Any development of the theorisation of cultural institutions (the ever present context of the text, whether a cinema or an art centre, a conference hall or a community centre) would require both a theory of dominant and subordinate cultures, and some empirical knowledge of the actual practices of the various cultural institutions, their characteristic modes of address and the social class of their consumers.³³ This last question concerning the social class of those served by a particular institution also raises questions of 'cultural competence' or of 'reading capacity'. For the ability to decipher certain codes or certain code-breaking operations is culturally and socially determined; and as there are institutions of cultural production and consumption so also there are institutions of reading; a reader approaches a text from within a particular 'apparatus of reading'. Any cultural producer who fails to investigate the relationship between social class and reading competence produces in a vacuum.

3) SUBJECTIVITY

It has become a central and distinctive principle of film theory in the '70s that questions of signification cannot be separated from questions of subjectivity. The analysis of the production of meaning has correspondingly shifted from an analysis of textual features to an analysis of the text-reader relationship, and to the role of the reader in 'producing' the meaning of the text. Barthes' work on the 'readerly' and the 'writerly' text has validated the latter (the text which maximises the work or participation of the reader) at the expense of the former³⁴. An investigation of the ways in which the subjectivity of the reader is constructed has thus inevitably become crucial to any study of the modes of consumption of filmic texts, and the characteristic terms of study, for the 1970s, have been drawn from developments in psychoanalysis, and from work on the relationship between language and subjectivity. The recovery of Brecht has been undertaken from within this framework, and although his terminology is clearly not psychoanalytic, it is compatible with and indeed contributes to an understanding and validation of the processes of 'active reading' propounded by those film theorists working within a broadly psychoanalytic tradition.³⁵ The traditional conceptualisation of reader and text as separate, completed, discrete, 'self-contained' is undermined or refused in Brecht's formulation of the role of the reader or spectator. In the practice of the epic theatre both text and reader are in some way decentred, and out of a qualitatively new relationship a new cultural phenomenon is to be distinguished. Brecht (as well as many of the film theorists of the '70s) argued that it was the responsibility of the progressive cultural producer to foster this new relationship, to recog-

³³ Very little of this empirical work on audiences has been undertaken outside of broadcasting and press research. But for one important example of such work see David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, London, British Film Institute, 1980.

³⁴ See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 4.

³⁵ See, for example, Stephen Heath, *op cit*, pp 103-128. This issue of *Screen* was devoted to Brecht; a later issue, Winter 1975/6, vol 16, no 4, published transcripts of the 1975 Edinburgh Film Festival Brecht Event.

³⁶ Stephen Heath, op cit, 112.

³⁷ Paul Willemen, 'Notes on Subjectivity', *Screen*, Spring 1978, vol 19, no 1, pp 41-69.

³⁸ 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction', op cit, p 72.

nise the phenomenon and to allow it to develop.

The work, Brecht argues, would be incomplete without the active participation of the reader:

*It is also as spectator that the individual loses his epicentral role and disappears; he is no longer a private person "present" at a spectacle organised by theatre people, appreciating a work which he has shown to him; he is no longer a simple consumer, he must also produce. Without active participation on his part, the work would be incomplete. . . .*³⁶

The emphasis here is on the subjectivity of the reader completing or producing the meaning of the text, and is in this respect quite different from those '70s theories of the 'reader-inscribed-in-the-text' for which the subjectivity of the reader was a mere effect of textual strategies. There has been considerable confusion here, in the theorisations of political modernism, as to the procedures whereby subjectivity is constituted; these confusions can be expressed, if in an exaggerated and schematic form, by the question: 'Is the reader a figment in the imagination of the text, or is the text a figment in the imagination of the reader?' Paul Willemen usefully contributed to the clarification of this debate in pointing out the ways in which the subjectivities of readers are constituted, historically, elsewhere than in the moment of relationship with a particular film text; and that the process of subject construction includes but exceeds, the moment of encounter with a single text.³⁷

One crucial addition that Brecht's conceptualisation of the reader-text relationship brings to some of the '70s formulations of subjectivity, lies in his recognition of the factor of class difference in specifying subject positions. He spoke of his works being designed to 'divide the audience', and believed that they provided a pleasurable means of learning, but only for the members of those social classes who had an interest in learning, who needed to learn. For Brecht the passion to learn is a characteristic of exploited and oppressed social groups:

*Learning has a very different function for different social strata. There are strata who cannot imagine any improvement in conditions: they find the conditions good enough for them. . . . But there are also strata 'waiting their turn' who are discontented with conditions, have a vast interest in the practical side of learning. . . . know that they are lost without learning; these are the best and keenest learners.*³⁸

Brecht's theatre 'for pleasure and for instruction' is designed to offer substantial knowledge and the scope for substantial criticism to these social groups. It is this concern with a subjectivity conceived of in collective and class terms that has been largely absent from the psychoanalytic tradition in film studies. It is a concern that must now receive urgent attention.

Cultural Production in the 1980s: 'You Never Know Where You Are With Production'

In conversations with Benjamin, Brecht commented upon Lukacs and the other official exponents of Socialist Realism in the 1930s:

*They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is unforeseeable. You never know what's going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the apparatchik and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.*³⁹

There are many factors at the present time contributing to the censoring of debate about production, and in some cases contributing to the censorship of production itself. Firstly, in the West, there is the power of those who own and control the means of cultural production or who control access to the means of production: the owners of private capital (those who keep an 'open mind' but a tight purse), the heads of studios, the executive producers of television companies, the heads of production companies and of commercial agencies, and, in the case of state finance, the privately appointed not publicly elected members of those boards and committees that act as the guardians of cultural excellence. In all of these cases any form of public accountability concerning the quality of the product is non-existent or minimal. Secondly, there is the power of those who either control the means of distribution and exchange or who control the production of the discourses of criticism ('consumer advice') which in turn facilitate or impede exchange. In the first category are to be found the buyers, distributors and exhibitors (whether these work on behalf of private capital or on behalf of state institutions); in the second category are the mainstream television and movie reviewers and critics. Thirdly, there is the power (very limited in our society) of the cultural critics and theorists. This work of cultural theory has made very little headway into the mainstream of a broad public understanding and criticism of audio-visual productions, but in Britain it has had its effects in the realm—grossly underfunded and only partly supported by state finance—of the 'independent cinema'. It is among these theorists and within the independent production sector that the ideas or the particular appropriations of Brecht have most clearly entered into the currency of contemporary concerns. But the memories of Brecht that have gone into circulation in this sector have been weighted in a particular way, and now require some re-adjustment, some reconsideration. For the process of remembering in the recent past has recovered Brecht the modernist, not Brecht the entertainer; Brecht the anti-illusionist, not Brecht the socialist with an interest in mass politics and the forms of popular art.

It would be irresponsible to suggest that the cultural theorists have been the 'enemies of production' in the sense in which Brecht used the term. Indeed, of the three categories of those exercising control over production, outlined above, the theorists have been the least powerful

³⁹ *Understanding Brecht*, op cit, p 118.

⁴⁰ Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', trans Susan Bennett, *Screen Reader 1*, London, Society for Education in Film and Television, 1977, p 6.

⁴¹ Jonathan Curling and Fran McLean, 'The Independent Film-makers Association Annual General Meeting and Conference', *Screen*, Spring 1977, vol 18, no 1, p 116.

and the most subject to attacks from the dominant cultural mainstream and from a vociferous, anti-intellectual lobby. The attack on theory is a revolt against reason, the desperation of which has tended historically to serve only the social *status quo*. But the particular substance and mode of operation of cultural theory in the '70s, particularly that form of cultural theory that ushered political modernism to the centre of the stage, must now be subjected to assessment and to some criticism. The versions of Brecht set in circulation after the 'Brecht Event' at the Edinburgh Festival (Summer 1975), out of the special issue of *Screen* which preceeded that event (Summer 1974), and through various interventions within the Independent Film-makers' Association in the latter half of the '70s tended to concentrate upon the 'Brechtianisms' of distancing, anti-illusionism, deconstruction, the critique of identification processes and the dismantling of 'classical' narrative. It was a recovery of Brecht guided by the revival of interest in modernism characteristic of post-'68 French cultural theory, and in line with the 'politics of form' debate for which film production 'only becomes politically effective if it is linked with a breaking down of the traditional way of depicting reality'.⁴⁰ It was also a recovery effected from within the parameters of an interest in audience subjectivity largely specified in psychoanalytic terms.

There is no sense in which this process of recovery is now to be refused or dismissed; rather what is required now is a shift of emphasis, and a sensitivity to the manner and arena within which cultural theory presents itself. The sometimes unhelpful stance of such theoretical work has been usefully specified as follows:

*Film-makers have at times a real fear of theory, a fear that is produced by the tone of some theoretical writing, owing to the apparently prescriptive nature of its demands and opinions, which are often casually dismissive of considerable bodies of work.*⁴¹

What is required for cultural theorists and producers to move forward into the 1980s is a closer investigation of the actual practices of recent cultural production, not in terms of their adherence or lack of adherence to certain Brechtian 'norms', but rather in terms of the very particularity and unexpectedness of some of the aesthetic devices adopted and developed. Criticism and cultural theory have not yet sufficiently engaged with the variety of devices – the unexpectedness – of English 'independent' cinema. We might begin by looking at the range of new documentary techniques developed for the analysis and representation of a complex and contradictory social reality in *Song of the Shirt* (Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling, 1979) and *Taking A Part* (Jan Worth, 1979); at the use of humour in the context of a visual deconstruction of the practices of television journalism in *News and Comment* (Frank Abbott, 1978); at the deceptively simple inter-weaving of fact and fiction in *Often During the Day* (Joanna Davis, 1979); at the new approaches to storytelling in *Exchange and Divide* (Margaret Dickinson, 1980), and at the ambitious use of parable and metaphor, the visually pleasurable and thus



Song of the Shirt



Taking A Part



News and Comment

memorable rendering of the past as a landscape of conflict, a space for searching and struggling in *In the Forest* (Phil Mulloy, 1978).

There is another sort of Brechtianism ripe now for revival. It derives from the Brecht who combines a passion for analysis with a pleasure in living, in observing, in accepting change and contributing to change; a Brecht who combines the capacity for good story-telling with the good sense in common sense, the impulse to analyse, to 'take things apart' to see how they work, and with the vehemence and clarity of a direct address to the only 'audience' that has it in its power to change the world and existing social relations:

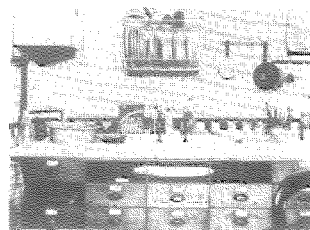
*And I always thought: the very simplest words
Must be enough. When I say what things are like
Everyone's heart must be torn to shreds.
That you'll go down if you don't stand up for yourself
Surely you see that.*⁴²

Sheffield, February 28, 1982.

I should like to acknowledge the usefulness of Dana Polan's article: 'Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema', *Jump Cut*, no 17, April 1978, pp 29-32.

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⁴² *Poems*, Part Three, 1938-1956, op cit, p 452.



Often During the Day



Exchange and Divide



In the Forest

Now that we have
a movie star in the
White House
are you ready for
a radical film
magazine?

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SUBS
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Individuals 4 issues \$6.00
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THE RADICAL FILM FUNDING OF ZDF

SHEILA JOHNSTON INTRODUCES AN INTERVIEW WITH ECKART STEIN OF ZDF GERMAN TELEVISION

Introduction

CINEMA, TELEVISION: TWO different media, each with its own separate apparatus of production and dissemination. In Britain this is taken for granted – but the West German model suggests that it need not be so.

It is by now almost a commonplace that the New German Cinema owes its existence to the munificence of television. There are exceptions of course. International superstars like Fassbinder, Wenders or Herzog may be able to command the support of private capital in the persons of Luggi Waldleitner or Francis Coppola (often reverting afterwards, however, to public patronage: Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen* was a wholly commercial project, although his next film, *Lola* had television money in it). Some enterprising tyros like Frank Ripploh (*Taxi zum Klo*) can perform small miracles with no outside backing at all. But the vast majority of West German author-producers expect, at some point in their long trek through the state, regional and municipal film funding agencies, to go shopping for some form of support from one of the television stations: a pre-sale, co-production agreement, or perhaps the sale of a previous, already completed project which will help pay for the next one.

There are ten television companies in West Germany, nine regionally based, one national (the ZDF or *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*), all of them structured as public service corporations. Financed from a combination of licence fees and advertising revenue, they are publicly accountable and, under an historic Federal Court ruling in 1961, charged with

providing a platform for 'all socially relevant groups'.¹ To secure this, the companies are subject to an elaborate system of checks and balances. Programmes (drama and light entertainment as well as news and current affairs) are expected to remain within the nebulous bounds of constitutionality; the composition of administrative bodies and key personnel is dictated by the relative power of the political parties and influence of key interest groups. This power and influence varies widely from region to region, and if a radical film-maker is hardly likely to be welcomed with open arms by the BR (*Bayerischer Rundfunk*, the station which services Catholic, conservative South Germany, power base of right-wing politician Franz-Josef Strauss), she or he can always go elsewhere: the wealthy, SPD-dominated WDR (*Westdeutscher Rundfunk*) is a good bet. In theory, the system guarantees a wide diversity of different work.

It should perhaps be said that the relationship of film to television is actually not so much parasitic (though this is often implied) as symbiotic. For a variety of reasons, West German broadcasting needs a lively independent cinema. Using freelancers means exploiting underpaid (or even unpaid) labour to get cheap airtime. By contracting work out, television can be seen to be fulfilling its mandate to provide a forum for a range of different 'socially relevant groups'; while, by attaching a programme to a named individual, it can exempt itself as an institution from charges of 'imbalance'.² West German television is 'the vast skeleton of a machinery for the employment of freelance people'; indeed as large a proportion as '60% of all the productions transmitted by the ZDF come from outside that organisation'.³ Like it or not, these two German media are inextricably intertwined.

A number of German film-makers and critics don't like it. In aesthetic terms, they⁴ see the result of this forced marriage as the infamous 'amphibian film'—a strange beast, supposedly able to inhabit both media, in fact at home in neither—as Sven Hansen put it in *Die Welt*: 'running in the water, swimming on the land'. Ideologically, too, the participation of television is felt by many to enforce compromise. The swelling *Tendenzwende* (right-wing backlash) of the '70s placed the broadcasting companies under ever-increasing political pressure, resulting in an obsession with 'balance' and safe, consensus programming. Radical projects, especially on touchy topical issues like terrorism or *Berufsverbot*, began to find it difficult to attract television funding.⁵

In quantitative terms, *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* is a very small fish in the vast pool of West German broadcasting. A sub-division of the ZDF's main television drama department (*Die Hauptredaktion Fernsehspiel und Film*), it operates with a minimal budget, a staff of only ten, and a single weekly slot: every Thursday at 10 pm. Yet, despite its own limitations and the crisis besetting West German broadcasting as a whole, dkF has attracted international attention and acclaim for its pioneering programme policy.

As ZDF's 'workshop studio', dkF is unusual in having an explicit mandate to promote aesthetic experiment. This contrasts with the recent tendency in German film and television finance towards funding on the

¹ See A Williams, *Broadcasting and Democracy in West Germany*, London, Bradford University Press, 1976, pp 29 ff.

² See S Johnston, 'The Author as Public Institution', *Screen Education*, Autumn/Winter 1979, number 32/33, pp 74-78.

³ Anthony Smith, 'The Relationship of Management with Creative Staff', in Lord Annan (Chairman) *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, August 1977, paragraphs 82 and 84.

⁴ One of the most vociferous of these has been Hans C Blumenberg, film critic of the prestigious weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. See for instance his two articles 'Glanz und Elend des neuen deutschen Films' reprinted in Hans Günther Pflaum (ed) *Jahrbuch Film 77/78*, Munich & Vienna, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1977.

⁵ These pressures are traced by R Collins and V Porter, *WDR and the Arbeiterfilm*, London, British Film Institute, 1981, chapter 7, where they are seen as responsible for the demise of a cycle of left-wing 'workers' films' made for WDR in the early 1970s. See also S Johnston, 'A Star is Born: Fassbinder and the New German Cinema', *New German Critique* (forthcoming).

⁶ J Dawson, 'The Sacred Terror', *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1979, pp 242-5; S Johnston, 'Coming Down from the Mountain', in S Johnston (ed), *Wim Wenders*, BFI Dossier 10, London, British Film Institute, 1981.

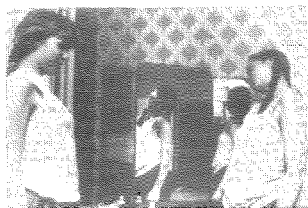
basis of the elegant literary screenplay: the 'well-made' script, is considered important, rather than proposals for technical or formal innovation.⁶ Witness the example of Hellmuth Costard's *Der kleine Godard* (*Little Godard*), a project devised to test his experimental Super-8 filming system. One funding agency turned down his application for a grant on the grounds that 'the selection procedure can be carried out only on the basis of fully worked-out scripts, not exposés or outlines';⁷ eventually the film was made with a grant from the Ministry of the Interior – and from dkF.

Most funding bodies are controlled by large committees on which a motley assortment of interest groups are represented. For a long time, one of the main sources of finance, the *Filmförderungsanstalt* (Film Subsidy Board) had an administrative board of no less than 33 members, bringing together such strange bedfellows as politicians (of all parties), cinema owners, film journalists, distributors, television technicians, the odd film-maker and representatives of the Catholic and Evangelical churches. Scripts submitted had to be approved by a two-thirds majority (reduced in 1979 in a simple majority endorsement). The aim: to insure against the risk that public-funded projects might outrage the average *Bürger* and tax-payer. The result: the flowering of a new and peculiarly West German genre, the *Gremienfilm* (committee film), first cousin to the amphibian film, the main distinguishing feature of which is that it is utterly inoffensive and usually based on one of the classroom classics of German bourgeois literature.

The fact that dkF is a small department with correspondingly fewer people involved in the decision-making is a positive asset here. More importantly, as its head, Eckart Stein, points out in the interview below, choices are made 'communally, not by majority'; sometimes only two members are in favour of a project, which is nonetheless realized. The need, then, for each person in the department, Stein notes elsewhere⁸, is to achieve a balance between dissent on individual points and consent to the department's programming policy as a whole.

Moreover, dkF is explicit that a finely-crafted script is *not* a precondition for funding; instead it sees its task as encouraging the kind of person who 'has insight but is unable to express it... This subjective dimension is more important to us than a polished, well-written, carefully planned screenplay'.⁹ It might be added here, recalling the truisms about the primacy of the writer-playwright, script-centredness and dominance of the theatrical tradition within *British* television drama, that the lessons to be learned from this particular dkF practice do not only apply to German broadcasting.

There are several points to be made about this insistence on the primacy of the individual vision. Firstly, it has freed the department from the crippling notions of 'professionalism' often used by television practitioners to shroud their work in mystery and protect it against outside intervention and challenge. dkF is prepared to sponsor total amateurs, as the evidence of film-maker Jutta Brückner bears out¹⁰ (the relative absence of restrictive union practices in West Germany is clearly an enabling



The Hungry Years: directed by Jutta Brückner, financed by ZDF.

factor here). The result, an exceptional degree of access for women and other disadvantaged groups, is again an instructive example for British television and, more particularly, Channel 4.

Das kleine Fernsehspiel aims to provide a 'forum', to compile an 'anthology' of individual 'testimonies to the age'. This is undoubtedly compatible with the heavy emphasis on 'personal statement' informing the New German Cinema and West German television as a whole.¹¹ It may well be because dkF has refused to impose what Stein calls 'an ideological straitjacket' on its productions, favouring instead a certain catholicity in its programming strategy, that it has been able to weather the *Tendenzwende*, which killed off more overtly political television like the WDR *Arbeiterfilm* cycle. After all, it would be difficult for even the most conservative media pundit to argue that dkF's ambition to 'provide a forum for witnesses' was not compatible with its constitutional obligation to serve the interests of 'all socially relevant groups'!

Finally, it is worth signalling the differing priorities of West German and British independent film-making and briefly drawing out some of the implications for possible future collaboration and dialogue.

The concept of authorship, centred on the absolute sovereignty of individual vision and personal expression, was elaborated by the independent film lobby in Germany in the early '60s in opposition to the existing commercial cinema's 'stereotypical and schematised plots' and 'factory-like production system where standardised models are churned out on an assembly line'.

The notion of 'personal expression' has secured possibilities for West German independent film-makers rather different from those obtaining here – creating a culture that is not directly concerned with subverting existing conventions of representation. The final exchange in the interview below underlines the dissimilarities of perspective between British and West German independent film-making. DkF's overall approach, however, has much to offer in the British context, demonstrating how television can provide radical and open funding. To date, Channel 4 has not developed any comparable structure.

Screen: *Could you start by explaining how your department works?*

Eckart Stein: We have a weekly slot reserved for us, which is important because it allows us freedom to manoeuvre, to commit ourselves to risky adventures. We have 49 to 51 transmissions a year. It's an open-ended slot so that we are really able to do very very long projects, like Angelopoulos's *Alexander the Great* or Syberberg's *Ludwig*. We are orientated towards cinema rather than the television play tradition. Our objective is to create a forum, or an anthology of new cinematic expression from beyond television.

⁷ 'Der Film hat sich auf die Seite des Tatsächlichen geschlagen' (interview with Costard), *Filmkritik* 11/1978; 'Kann man in Deutschland Filme machen?', *Filmkritik* 12/1978.

⁸ E Stein, 'Das kleine Fernsehspiel – Ein Versuch konstruktiver Zumutung', unpublished in German. Translated and abridged by S Johnston in *Alternative Film-Making in Television: ZDF, a Helping Hand*, BFI Dossier 14, London, British Film Institute, 1982.

⁹ *ibid*, Brigitte Kramer, 'Witnesses to the Age' (trans S Johnston).

¹⁰ Patricia Harbord, 'Interview with Jutta Brückner', *Screen Education* Autumn/Winter 1981/2, number 40, pp 48 ff.

¹¹ See S Johnston, 'The Author as Public Institution', p 67.

How important do you feel is the weekly slot in maintaining a regular audience? We noticed that viewing figures seem to vary quite widely from week to week.

I think it is *essential* to have this kind of regular slot, because it is important to create with everybody, with the critics, with our people at the station, with ourselves, the certainty of a long-term project, rather than a limited commercial enterprise. There are times when for several weeks we do films which are to nobody's liking; but we feel we have a public by now, maybe half of which watches regularly to see what this week's programme is like (maybe this is too optimistic) the other half of which has a group interest in what we are doing. A film about homosexual teachers would attract primarily a homosexual public or viewers involved in education; or again for the women's films that we are doing a lot now, we would perhaps have mainly a female audience.

What are the differences between the kind of work commissioned by your department and that of other television drama departments?

The policy difference is that we are very openly and outspokenly doing difficult films without *any* concern for public acceptance. We do have good public acceptance, but we don't care about it. We are not scolded for films with low audience figures: in fact we are doing more and more of them. We are independent of this competition for the ratings, so we are guaranteed a certain liberty.

What is the main focus of your activities?

There are several. We don't normally buy films, we co-produce them, but three or four years ago we saw some Third World films which we thought it was very important to show. Then we discovered that there was a need to fund those films to get them done, and now we have a whole series of films from the Third World, from Africa or South America, which we encourage. Then five times a year we have to use studio facilities. Like most other stations ZDF has too many studio commitments and so five times a year we are condemned to the studio. There we have public discussions entitled *Spielraum* (Room To Manoeuvre), *real* public discussions (not just the kind with representatives of the public), open-end public discussion of controversial issues.

With the subject of the homosexual teachers, for example (one we haven't covered, though I would like to) we would have three little scenes played in the studio by a group of actors, totalling 20-25 minutes, giving the direction that we intend the discussion to go, to show the contradictions involved. We would invite about 10 experts, for instance a university teacher who has worked on the subject, someone from the Ministry of Education, maybe two or three groups of teachers. Then we would have the public, who would not just be the public who want to be on TV that night, but people who have a vital interest in the discussion:

parents who have a homosexual child; parents who are opposed to homosexual teachers; teachers who oppose their homosexual colleagues; homosexual teachers: people who are really involved.

That's what we did with the *Spielraum* about Turkish children born in Germany. We invited Turkish old people who found it very very difficult to adapt to German circumstances; young Turkish Germans, who spoke perfect German, who are almost offended to be called Turkish; some who want to go home with the skills they have learnt in Germany; others who have been in Germany for 18 years and can't speak Turkish but can't speak German either; people who want to send them all out of Germany; others who are trying to improve things for them.

Are these discussions transmitted live?

Yes, it's essential to transmit live. We have had very critical but wonderful moments. One of our rules is that we change the Chairperson regularly. We don't want to use TV personalities so we chose them from the radio. The essential point is that everyone can speak as long as they want, which very quickly creates a confidence with the public. It was really very good to see these Turkish people, old ladies who for the first time in their lives spoke out and said what they felt about Germany in Turkish on TV. And with one girl we had really a very, very moving moment of TV, a real testimony of the time. She spoke for five or six minutes, trying to give expression to what she felt, not succeeding in German, and not succeeding in Turkish. It was a very hard moment for the general public, seeing the difficulties Turkish people have. So these transmissions are very rough, pure, hard TV work, unlike cinematic work. It started out of pure necessity, but it turned out to be a very important thing for all of us, because it establishes contact with the public.

Will you expand this from five slots a year?

No, because this has been appreciated by so many colleagues that a lot of other departments are doing the same thing, but not all of it live.

Do you discuss the films you transmit with members of the viewing public as it were, people who aren't film-makers. . . .

This takes place mostly in the cinemas: both film and TV critics write about the work we co-produce. In addition, every Thursday one of us answers viewers' phonecalls. We also get reactions through letters. And the *Hauptredaktion Fernsehspiel und Film*, ZDF's overall drama department, puts out a glossy promotional magazine in which my department has a section with small ideological articles explaining what we want to do—or at least pretending that we know what we are going to do three months in advance, which very often we don't.

Is this brochure designed for the general public?

'Small ideological articles' in ZDF's promotional magazine.



No, it's more intended for *Volkshochschulen* (adult education institutes), the press, the universities, the TV schools – so it is not really public. Maybe we could do more here, maybe we are a little lazy. Because this publication is so well-established, we don't really feel the need to create more impact. We try very hard to present our slot as an integral part of the TV output; we don't try to be punk.

How do the staff work?

We are a group of ten people, very much dependent on team spirit; we are a group of friends, with a long-standing loyalty to each other. We discuss every project as a group, and no decision is made by anyone singly. We meet once a month to discuss all the projects that have been read or studied by any one of us, and the decision is reached communally, not by a majority but in common. Sometimes there are only two of us saying 'this *has* to be done' and eight saying no – but it will be done, with all ten of us supporting the project.

How do you find proposals? By being offered them, or by commissioning?

We do search out projects, but we have about 40 proposals for each programme we actually succeed in doing. I think we have built up confidence among film-makers as a result of having been established for seven years. There is only a very small residue of suspicion. Our involvement with film-makers is mostly a question of confidence, of personal relationships, working together, of discussing films together, going to cinemas together. It is *never* authoritarian in the sense of indicating to people what they are to do. The artistic responsibility rests entirely with the film-maker. There is a very well established substructure of communication; Steve Dwoskin for instance is really one of our outposts. He has worked with us and puts us in contact with people who it might be worthwhile to know in Britain; there are others like Angelopoulos in Greece, Jean-Pierre Gorin in Berkeley, Peter Lilienthal in Germany. There is an underground network of film-makers collaborating to put us in contact with other film-makers, discussing, criticising our position . . .

You don't decide that a film should be made about a particular subject, and then approach someone to do it?

Well, it's more a matter of our getting together with film-makers producing ideas from them. Now we are particularly looking for films like Helke Sander's *Der subjektive Faktor*, which would be men and women of the '68 generation looking back on their experiences, and on how little has changed. Again, through showing Agnes Varda's films we have made a series of contacts which have produced a number of women's films. We do have a much higher proportion of women film-makers than other departments, but it's not the result of a conscious policy.

Outside In: directed by Steve Dwoskin, financed by ZDF.



Poto and Cabengo: directed by Jean-Pierre Gorin, financed by ZDF.

I started in the theatre in Munich working as an administrator and assistant director. I became involved from this in ZDF's project for *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* (*The Little Television Play*). It really seems a very strange title now. We want to keep it because it has become a kind of trademark. It began as a weekly run of individual 25 minute playlets made on film. In the '60s a lot of these began to appear, especially in Poland, France and Germany. They were 20, 25 or 30 minute films, and they opened everybody's eyes to the possibilities of programming on the margins of TV. It was really well established for several years; then it became more and more difficult to fill this 25 minute slot. So finally it was opened out into our present Thursday night. So this is the source of the title – 'kleine' – even for the 3½ hour films. But we are sticking to it as it points to our evolution over many years, which is perhaps that's why we are so well established.

How does your department function within ZDF's Hauptredaktion Fernsehspiel und Film? How is it different from the other subsections?

ZDF is the second channel, operating nationwide, and we are part of this *Hauptredaktion*, under the aegis of Heinz Ungureit. He is enthusiastic about cinema, so it is easy for us to do what we want. Inside ZDF we don't struggle for our freedom, we are granted it. Our position in the *Hauptredaktion* is simple because we have our fixed slot. Other sections have their slots. The *Redaktion* deals with all the films bought from the market, so really it's a huge bulk of screen time. We are just a small department working within it. Each department has an annual budget and amount of screen time. We don't compete with each other.

Do you see yourselves having influence on the other departments, showing them possibilities of making different kinds of programmes...?

Yes we try to convince them to take over film-makers after we have done a first or a second film because we don't want a film-maker to work for our department until he's 65. Often we succeed especially because of Ungureit's very sympathetic attitude. There are many examples, especially of German film-makers, who did their first and second films with us and then moved on to bigger money and other possibilities. A good example is Werner Schroeter, who started as an outsider, an underground film-maker, and is now getting large budgets. Most of Wenders', Herzog's and Fassbinder's films are done by the other departments – these three directors outreached our possibilities long ago, and we are grateful for that. *The Merchant of the Four Seasons* was the last Fassbinder we did.

How do you see the relationship between German cinema and the films you finance?

The Power of Men Is the Patience of Women: directed by Cristina Perinciolo, financed by ZDF.



The All-Round Reduced Personality - Redupers: directed by Helke Sanders, financed by ZDF.

After the war, there was no real rebirth of German cinema, because of the actions of the American distributors. Television took over the responsibility, and much of the dislike of television felt by film-makers in Germany is not because they are not granted enough money, but because they feel dependent on TV, over-controlled, over-functionalised by it. However, we try not to establish a paternalistic relationship. We leave film rights to the film-makers and give them TV as a forum. Almost all our films are shown in cinemas – sometimes before transmission, sometimes after. There's no moratorium.

German cinema's current problem is that Fassbinder, Herzog and Wenders have become international figures. Wenders became one of Coppola's protégés, Herzog isn't telling his fables in Germany, but trying to reach out for South American mythologies. And a lot of young German talent aspires to that kind of film-making. I know a lot of 35-year-old film-makers with their first script wanting to tell big stories, whereas I'm sure that Wenders is wondering if he wasn't a little more creative on the borders of Germany than on the borders of Hollywood.

There seemed to be a general mood of lassitude at Cannes last year. The mood of film-making was a rather reactionary one: love story, drug story, all over the world. Young progressive film-makers are just trying to adapt to a tired commercial organisation, one that is no longer aggressive like America's used to be. Our principle focus now is elsewhere: Third World films, women's films and in particular the revival of the documentary. There are many extremely interesting documentaries being made at the moment in Germany. This is a new school of film-makers, not of stars like Herzog, Wenders or Fassbinder, but groups of modest film-makers. They act as partners in a film-making industry that is not the commercial film industry. There is some hope that this kind of documentary film-making might lead to more: to something open to the imagination, to a new kind of fiction. There are several examples of this tendency of opening up images to a very private but not inaccessible film language: *Ich denke oft an Hawaïi* (*I Often Think about Hawaïi*); *Unversöhnliche Erinnerungen* (*Irreconcilable Memories*); *Septemberweizen* (*September Wheat*). This last has a kind of anger, not the anger of a documentarist, but the anger of an artist who is working with the material of the documentarist. That's very much what we feel to be the new way of film-making.

Do you co-produce films, and if so, who puts up the rest of the money for the Third World films?

The film-makers are so happy to have even the smallest amount of money and it is usually enough for them. They don't need actors, they don't need costumes, they don't need huge sums for the unions, they don't really have any obligations like we have. And I'm ashamed to say that most of the time it's the only production money there is, which isn't a good thing. But sometimes the French government does something, at least for the former French colonies, and in Belgium there is a lot of

interest in projects of this kind. When a film-maker in a Third World country says that German TV is interested, sometimes he can find money in his own country too; and at least they are not too much hindered with censorship.

Do you find any problems with your unions objecting to the way in which these films are made on very small amounts of money?

I must say not at all, not at all. Maybe our activity is left alone because it is a small total budget relative to the screen time, about 11 million Deutsche Mark. Much of the liberty is also due to the late transmission time, and the fact that we are not forced in any way to cooperate with an outside commercial company. To put it more optimistically, I think that any reasonable person with any sense of political responsibility would say that it is too important to do this kind of work, and not to hinder it by legalistic or other objections. I find a lot of general support with people who are politically offended by some of our transmissions. In principle there is a kind of understanding that we should not be tampered with, even though in single cases there is a lot of anger.

There is some unease from certain people working inside the system. I think I feel more uneasy about it as someone who is responsible for this kind of programme. It is of course a problem that somebody has to work for such little money. We consider a film that is totally financed by us as a co-production, because we say—morally, we have to say—that the underpaid work of a film-maker during eleven months of production counts as a co-production. For instance, Steve Dwoskin's work is underpaid, and his part in the co-production is his labour.

To what extent to the directors who work for you also obtain their money from other sources?

Most of the films we produce don't succeed in attracting outside investment other than ours; they are co-productions involving the film-makers' labour as the other contributions. But there are potential sources, which I am trying to revitalise, maybe with some foreign channels. That's why I'm trying to establish a link with Italian television, whose structure is similar to ours. For instance, Angelopolous can work for RAI Italian TV with a bigger budget. And within Germany now, there is regional and municipal support for film-making, in North Rhine-Westphalia, in Hamburg, in Berlin. They sometimes put in money: 10,000 to 30,000 DM (about £2,500 to £7,500). There is the Protestant Church, which contributed to September Wheat, and there are a lot of private sources.

Out of our 50 productions a year, there are about ten films of a more conventional nature, co-produced by the FFA (the *Filmsförderungsanstalt*, the Berlin-based national film-funding agency). The other 35 are co-productions between us and the film-makers. Our main concern is to sponsor German film-makers, and I do worry at the way we become

heavily involved in particular areas of film-making in other countries. For instance, now there is a terrifying number of American films made for our programme, totally financed by us only, without a dollar in them, and not only black film-makers' films which could reasonably be made with our money because they can attract no American finance. This began with Mark Rappaport's films. Now there are Jean-Pierre Gorin and James Banning, in addition to the three black film-makers who are doing films for us at the moment. I really feel a little scared by our involvement in America.

Is there a possibility of your working with Channel 4?

I'm really unable to judge. I know too little about how it works and how it will work. What I would like to happen is the establishment of contacts like the one we had with INA in France or those with one or two public TV stations in the States, like WNET in New York. We are collaborating with them in a project by the American film-maker Errol Morris. It would be ideal to have our American film-makers' films co-produced with an American TV station. Similarly we should establish a good friendly contact with Channel 4, to co-operate with British film-makers, and perhaps even get them to co-produce Belgian or Greek or Third World films. I'm sending over some twenty cassettes to Channel 4, to show them what we are doing and perhaps to win them by example. Perhaps we shall do the same in Italy.



The Trilogy: directed by Bill Douglas, financed by ZDF.

Are you discounting the possibility of working with the BFI Production Board?

We worked with them on Bill Douglas's *My Way Home*, but since then we have the impression that the projects they've sent us are the more normal ones. They are just asking for co-financing. We don't feel our role is just to put more money into a project, so that a more renowned actor can be used with another 20,000 DM from German sources.

Would you pass on such a project to one of your colleagues in one of the other sections?

Yes, we do that regularly even with departments outside the ZDF. We have friends in other stations, who may like a script that we perhaps do not like ourselves, so we give it to them. We would appreciate it if the other stations in Germany would do the same, but it is much more difficult for them, because they are not national. (The other nine television stations in West Germany are regionally based, although they all contribute to the ARD, the first, nationwide channel.)

The danger is that you would end up with one of those bland international co-productions. To avoid that, when we work with another television company abroad, we agree that one producer will have responsibility

for the whole thing. For instance, if we were to collaborate with Channel 4 on a British film-maker's project, we would all agree that the Fourth Channel should be responsible. No French or German TV editor should interfere with the project and tell them how it should be done.

You have run into some editorial problems: for instance, with Steve Dwoskin's The Silent Cry, INA insisted that a scene in a hospital was taken out and Steve agreed.

These problems never occur at the preparation stage, so you could really say a film is never not done for reasons of censorship. But once or twice a year on average we do feel that one scene or another should perhaps not be shown on TV. It once happened (this is a good example) with a film which was not shown at all on our programme – Rosa von Praunheim's death film. We gave Rosa the possibility of making the film, but we agreed to the TV censorship and opened the film in the cinemas, so it was publicly shown. The majority of my friends in the group felt that this film was on the frontiers, the limitations of TV, with its particular presentation of death. You can't really have the responsibility of transmitting a programme like that to a million people, some dying, some feeling suicidal, without any kind of control, which you always have in the cinema. So I think this is very legitimate censorship.

There's another example: we have just shown on TV a film by some Swiss film-makers: *In Brandenburg*, a very subjective view of a young Swiss Catholic who wanted to kill Hitler. It mentioned the name of our president, Carl Carstens, several times in connection with the SS, and we had to remove any reference to him. It was publicly discussed in all the newspapers, but I still feel very uneasy about it. The film has been shown in Berlin and Cannes in its entirety, it is not concealed, but this is an example of censorship.

Do you encourage film-makers to think about the TV transmission of their work when they're making films for you?

No, we leave them with the problem of how to make their film, and how to make a good film. We don't encourage them to care about whether it will be accepted on TV and whether the public will accept that they do the film their way. If it's a good film, it's a good film on TV, *always* without any exception. Angelopoulos's *Alexander the Great* is for me a film which works only in the cinema, but to see it on TV has been a huge adventure for many hundreds of thousands of people who have never seen an Angelopoulos film before. Even if only a small percentage is interested, this is far more than normally would have gone to the cinema to see an Angelopoulos film and they will go and see his next. The concern should really be with encouraging expression – pure expression, rather than trying to conform to one or the other medium – there are a lot of crippled programmes done that way.

You've had very little involvement with independent film-makers in Britain. James Scott and Steve Dwoskin have worked with you and you've been involved in the one isolated co-production with the BFI Production Board, but that seems to be all.

There are a lot of reasons for this. Fundamentally we are a German TV department and our principal concern (without imposing any limitation as we have no quota) is to do our own work, at home. We have always done co-productions, Hungarian films, Polish films, Italian, Greek, Third World; it goes in waves. Some British films reach out towards us, like James Scott's and Bill Douglas's for instance. *Nighthawks* came to us through INA. INA did not take the film, but they gave me the ten-minute proposal on film and that was how we became involved.

The type of work you're commissioning seems to be produced within a tradition of personal expression and individual vision: there's no one orthodoxy of form against which the work is defined.

We don't have those kinds of limitations, and so we are much freer to explore means of expression, and don't have to be so radical in defending a small amount of personal freedom of expression. This is maybe why the structuralist school has never had much echo in Germany.

There is some; for instance Werner Nekes, Klaus Wyborny.

We are doing just now a film with Wyborny, and Helmut Herbst. I would say that these are even more marginal than the normal margin.

Now that you've introduced a category of 'normal' marginality, do you think that there is a certain formal area, even in German film-making, which you are not really prepared to put onto television?

I actually find it normal that there *should* exist a margin that we are not aware of. Even a group working like ours has subjective criteria of the areas of film-making, and there *has* to be a kind of film-making which does not occur to us. But of course we would never refuse to do it. So the real answer to your question would be, no, we hope not. We hope that we are not prejudiced against particular kinds of film-making. But we do try to pass things on, where possible, to other departments. We are more inclined to pass on for instance, theatrical and avant-garde work. We are not against theatrical films or any multi-media theatric/cinematic adventures, but we feel that there should be room for that elsewhere. Or again, we never mix with animated films—with this kind of Canadian Film Board film-making. Maybe we have a prejudice against it too, but we feel we can justify it.

To try to sum up, which is always dangerous, the difference between the type of films which you finance which we've seen and our overall impression of

British independent cinema would be that the British films are much more concerned with subverting existing conventions of portrayal. They are always taking the way in which things are normally represented and in some way trying to expose those representations.

I would very much agree with that. This is due to the fact that there is an over-pressure of conventional film language and the opposition to this over-pressure is an over-reaction. It isn't an over-reaction in the British context, but for *us* it would be an over-reaction; and this may just be a misunderstanding, a lack of appreciation on our part. I would like to know more about independent film-making here, because not very much seems to come abroad. Perhaps this is why it seems to have become very hermetic. It is a little difficult to get into the mode because there is a kind of group language of signals only to be understood by friends.

It has a lot to do with different attitudes to how you decipher images: independent film asks you to read an image, to take it apart to see what its different elements are.

Perhaps we aren't used enough to this process. We ought perhaps to try for the benefit of us all to get used to this clandestine culture, before it just becomes esoteric in an incestuous way, which I think could happen.

There's a sense in which British film-makers are looking for contexts in which to work. There is no real art cinema as it exists in France and Germany, so they have to work on their own, outside that institutional structure and with very little money. Their audience consists of cinema activists or political activists who are used to discussion events. A lot of film-makers are unhappy at being confined to this audience. They are looking for ways of breaking out towards different kinds of audience.

(Interview conducted by John Ellis and Sheila Johnston)

From April through June 1982, the National Film Theatre and the Goethe Institute in London are presenting three series of ZDF films: including British film-makers and women directors (April, NFT); documentaries (May, Goethe Institute); and American and Third World film-makers (June, NFT).

RE-VIEWING WELLES

STEVE NEALE PREVIEWS A TELEVISED RETROSPECTIVE

The current BBC season of films directed by Orson Welles, together with a contextualising documentary, offers the chance to re-view, re-assess and re-read Welles' work. It unfortunately also furnishes yet another opportunity to promulgate the myths and legends that have surrounded Welles and his films, locking both into an almost hermetically-sealed, self-perpetuating image: that of the 'boy wonder', the genius, the individualist forever battling against the restrictive circumstances in which he has found himself (notably those of a crass, timid and commercial Hollywood system). The image has only been compounded by Welles' own penchant for publicity, by the nature of the characters he himself has tended to play in the films and even by those attempts to challenge some of the myths (most notably Pauline Kael's efforts to establish scriptwriter Herman J Mankiewicz as the true auteur of *Citizen Kane*). What follows, then, is an indication of alternative contexts in which to place the films, some of the more interesting critical comments made about them, and one or two more general points about Welles' films as a whole.

Welles came to the cinema from radio and the theatre, after co-founding the Mercury Theatre in 1937, staging a black, voodoo *Macbeth* and a *Julius Caesar* in modern dress, and achieving notoriety for his famous radio production of H G Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which created a national panic on Halloween night in 1938 by convincing half America that it was the target for Martian invasion. It was on the basis of work such as this that Welles was offered a unique contract by RKO in Hollywood. He was to make one film per year, of his own choice, as producer, director, scriptwriter, actor or any combination of the four. He was guaranteed 25% of the gross profits on the films he made, in each case receiving an advance of 150,000 dollars.

Citizen Kane was released in 1941 when Welles

was 26. It created a scandal *a clef* about the hero's resemblance to the newspaper tycoon, William Randolph Hearst. It was a critical success but a box-office failure. All this delineated the basic contours of an image that was largely to determine both Welles' own subsequent career and the ways in which his films have been discussed: Welles was the boy genius, the notorious individual(ist), a man whose talent was neither commercially viable nor containable within the Hollywood system. But there are other ways of analysing Welles' career, particularly his initial trajectory through literature, theatre and radio and its relation to his entry into Hollywood.

However particular his films and career turned out to be, Welles was merely one of a plethora of directors, actors and writers coming to Hollywood from the theatre during the 1930s, after the introduction of sound. Hollywood needed people used to writing, directing and speaking dialogue. The films he made are full both of literary and theatrical devices and of aural techniques derived from the practices of radio drama, precisely the contexts from which he emerged. Many also, of course, were adapted from the canon of liberal literary and dramatic culture: *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *The Trial*, *Chimes at Midnight* (not to mention unrealised projects like *Moby Dick* and *Don Quixote*).

A full study needs to be made of the impact of radio and theatre aesthetics on Hollywood movies after the coming of sound. In Welles' case the forms and devices in question include the use of voice-over narration, either by an omniscient narrator (usually Welles himself) and/or by one of the major characters (usually Welles again). Hence *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Trial* and *The Lady from Shanghai*. And hence the multiple narrators and narrations in *Citizen Kane*. (In combination with Welles' individual notoriety and fame, and with the nature of the contract he signed with RKO, this textual

emphasis on the point of narrative enunciation, and the identification of that point with the voice and body of Welles himself, tended all the more to generate an image of Welles as auteur.) Other devices from radio and the stage include the use of varied styles of exposition, and an interest in different modes of narrative time and different ways of structuring and marking the positions and points of view of different characters within an overall narrative framework. (All of these had been subject to experiment within the contemporary literary culture.)

What made *Citizen Kane* so special, what continues to make it the film that heads the critics' lists of the top ten movies, is precisely its mobilisation of the full gamut of these devices, in conjunction with the use of a variety of different cinematic modes and styles. Although written from the evaluative point of view of a realist aesthetic, Evan William Cameron's article, 'Citizen Kane: The Influence of Radio Drama on Cinematic Design'¹, has very usefully identified and analysed the full range of devices derived from radio drama. And in a particularly interesting section, Cameron even relates Welles' use of visual mixes, transitions and continuity devices to the use of similar aural techniques in radio, hypothesising that in effect Welles often simply transferred such techniques from the aural to the visual plane. Meanwhile, the full range of the narrative and aesthetic devices present in the film have been fairly exhaustively categorised in the series of articles comprising the dossier, 'Semiotics and *Citizen Kane*' published in *Film Reader* 1.² Garner Simmons' contribution to this collection usefully begins to contextualise the film's famous use of deep focus cinematography, whose emergence at this time can be related to the development of camera lenses and lighting technology in Hollywood after the coming of sound.³ Simmons' article also touches on *Citizen Kane*'s use of matte and process shots. Together with the artifice evident in abundance elsewhere in the film, these techniques tend to undercut the theses advanced in Andre Bazin's influential writings about Welles' use of deep focus.

Bazin argued that Welles' employment of the sequence shot in conjunction with deep focus put him and his films in the forefront of a re-emerging realist tradition in the cinema, linked, ultimately, to the ontological properties of photography.⁴ This tradition was one for which

the critic polemicalised in opposition to what he saw as a series of anti-realist movements, including Soviet montage cinema, German expressionism, and the classical traditions of Hollywood *découpage* that had gained ascendancy during the '30s, seeing each as in their own way betraying the cinema's realist vocation. The perversity of this argument, when faced with the artificialities of Welles' use, not only of deep focus and the sequence shot, but of other devices as well, has been stressed by Peter Wollen in his introduction to the *Film Reader* dossier on *Citizen Kane*,⁵ and by Christopher Williams in his introduction to the Welles season held at the National Film Theatre in 1972.

Nevertheless, Bazin's close descriptions of scenes and sequences from Welles films (published in his book, *Orson Welles*⁷) remain in many ways the best pieces of writing on Welles' visual style, curiously detached and detachable from his overall polemical stance. Williams suggests linking this style to the traditions of Hollywood melodrama, with their stress on technological perfection, and on a studied artificiality of decor, acting and general *mise-en-scène*. Wollen too stresses the ornamental quality of Welles' style, linking it to a mannerist (as opposed to an expressionist or symbolist) aesthetic tradition. He also argues for a re-appropriation of aspects of *Kane* away from both the Art-oriented, anti-Hollywood critical tradition (for whom Welles, along with Stroheim and Chaplin, was the ultimate martyr to the

¹ in *Sound in the Cinema*, ed Evan William Cameron, New York, Redgrave, 1980.

² 'Semiotics and *Citizen Kane*', *Film Reader* 1, 1975, pp 9-54.

³ Garner Simmons, 'Citizen Kane: The Camera', *Film Reader* 1, pp 38-9. This question is also dealt with more generally in Patrick Ogle, 'Technological and Aesthetic Influences Upon the Development of Deep Focus Cinematography in the United States', and Christopher Williams, 'The Deep Focus Question: Some Comments on Patrick Ogle's Article', *Screen*, Spring 1972, vol 13, no 1, pp 45-72 and pp 73-76; and in Jean-Louis Comolli, 'Technique and Ideology: Camera Perspective and Depth of Field', *Film Reader* 2, 1977, pp 128-140.

⁴ Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (two volumes), University of California Press, 1977.

⁵ Peter Wollen, 'Introduction to *Citizen Kane*', *Film Reader* 1, pp 9-15.

⁶ Christopher Williams, National Film Theatre programme booklet, June-July 1972.

⁷ Andre Bazin, *Orson Welles*, New York, Harper and Row, 1978.

Hollywood factory) and the pro-American tradition (for whom *Kane* tends to be valued as much for its thematic as for its formal qualities). He stresses its heterogeneity of aesthetic devices, its flaunting of technique, its complexities of diegetic time, its labyrinthine structure, even its use of the long take, in order to link it to a modern filmmaking tradition that would include Snow, Rivette, Godard, Warhol and Jansco and films like *Last Year at Marienbad*.

Some of these aspects of Welles' style also figure in Stephen Heath's analysis of *Touch of Evil*, a thriller made by Welles for Universal in 1958. Following *Kane*, Welles made *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Stranger* (1948), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1950) and *Macbeth* (1950) in Hollywood. *Ambersons* was made at RKO, but was subsequently re-cut and partly re-shot, and, following a change of management personnel, Welles' contract was cancelled. He made *The Stranger* for Sam Spiegel's International Pictures, *The Lady from Shanghai* for Columbia and *Macbeth* for Republic. All were commercial failures. Welles found it impossible to get directing work, so he moved abroad, putting European co-productions together and helping to finance the films he subsequently made, *Othello* and *Mr Arkadin* (*Confidential Report*), with the money paid him as an actor. His return to Hollywood for *Touch of Evil* was in many ways fortuitous. Charlton Heston, his co-star, agreed to participate only on the (mis)understanding that Welles was directing. In any case the film had a relatively sympathetic producer in Albert Zugsmith (who also produced *Tarnished Angels* and *Written on the Wind*, two of Sirk's most radically adventurous melodramas) and was completed without any major problems.

Heath's work on *Touch of Evil*⁸ is less a reading of the film, self-contained, than an analysis of the codes and systems traversing the text as an instance of Hollywood narrative cinema. The film was chosen for the purpose of the analysis, however, because its stylistic characteristics tend to amplify the codes and systems which articulate its process, generating a kind of pressure which pushes them to the point of hyperbole and excess, while simultaneously setting up a tension between the text itself and these very codes and systems. In Heath's words: *several reasons led to the choice of this film; most notably, the original intuition (the feeling) of an*

*extremely openly coded film – an obviousness of systems: from, say, the straightforward adoption of stock modes of continuity transition or the simple coding of shot angles into one or two dramatically available systems to the easy 'difficulty' of the various elements that go to make up the signature 'Welles' ('baroque', 'expressionism', 'chiaroscuro' – the usual terms for that mixture of effects of depth of focus, 18.5 distortion, lighting, composition in frame, etc) – constantly rendered oblique, overturned; the impression of a filmic system in which the narrative was constantly deflected, out of true.*⁹

The tension between film and system, the existence of a pressure (and hence, a resistance) productive of those figures not only of hyperbole and excess but also of *waste* which dominate Welles' work, is, perhaps, itself the ultimate mark of Welles' style. This tension combines with a fascination for the act of story-telling itself, evident in the range of narrative devices Welles has used, in the ways in which his films often stop, as it were, in order to allow characters to tell stories to one another. It is the very foundation of a film like *The Immortal Story*, in which a rich old man tries to make a fictional tale come true. This complex of tensions seems to motivate not only Heath's article, but also Wollen's interest in *Citizen Kane* and Christopher Williams' interest in 'the films which orthodox criticism tends to find flawed – *The Stranger*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Othello* – in which an almost overpowering melodramatic investment co-exists with a fracturing of the normal modes of dramatic discourse so that the films become both more and less than stories about characters in given situations.'¹⁰

Before attempting to identify some bases of this tension and a concomitant characteristic of Welles' style, that of display, it is necessary to say something about the themes and structures that recur insistently across the range of Welles' work (a range which, in terms of production and genre is in some ways quite diverse).

A particular constellation of themes and concerns tend to cross most of Welles' films. The characteristic Wellesian protagonist is one. Welles' films are pervaded by themes of power:

⁸ Stephen Heath, 'Film and System', *Screen*, Spring 1975, vol 16, no 1, pp 7-77 and Summer 1975, vol 16, no 2, pp 91-113.

⁹ Ibid, vol 16, no 1, p 11.

¹⁰ Williams, op cit, p 3.

the exercise and mechanics of power, the morality of power and, especially significant, the usurpation of power. These themes cluster around the figure of the grand, larger-than-life but destructive (and self-destructive) egoist (Kane, Macbeth, Quinlan in *Touch of Evil*, Mr Clay in *The Immortal Story*, Mr Arkadin, Professor Rankin in *The Stranger*, even Iago in Welles' *Othello*). Welles himself has discussed these characters in terms of the figure of Faust. And it is undoubtedly the case that the films are full, in Andrew Sarris' words, of genuinely 'Faustian fantasies':

*The dramatic conflict in a Welles film often arises from the dialectical collision between morality and megalomania, and Welles more often than not plays the megalomaniacal villain without stirring the calls of conscience.*¹¹

Sarris usefully pinpoints the contradictory aspects of a thematic which lends much of Welles' drama its extraordinary tension. He also indicates Welles' pretensions as a moralist (the elements of which derive from the common sense banalities of liberal humanist culture), and points to the way the films tend to undercut the very morality they set out to inscribe. Welles himself claims 'I'm against the Faustian outlook, because I believe it is impossible for a man to be great unless he acknowledges something greater than himself. It can be the Law, it can be God, it can be Art, or any other idea, but it must be greater than man. I've played a whole line of egoists, and I detest egoism.' However, as Sarris points out, the films themselves betray a *fascination* with these egoists which cuts across their director's stated position. It is perhaps because the narrative structures and devices employed by the films are designed to generate an ethical distance from the Faustian protagonist, while other aspects (notably those of performance, and of the drive toward identification evident in the relations between the protagonist and the camera) work to negate that distance, that some of the discursive and stylistic tensions instanced above tend to be produced.

A second theme is that of nostalgia, loss, waste, the wish for a return to the past (before the rupture signalled by the protagonist's adoption of a Faustian stance), in particular to an idealised image of childhood. This theme is especially evident in *Kane*, *Ambersons*, *Mr Arkadin* and *The*

Immortal Story. Welles himself has described *Chimes at Midnight* as 'a lament for Merrie England' (ie nostalgia for an imaginary past). The theme is also present, structurally inflected, in Macbeth's destruction of an order of grace whose very symbol is childhood and Othello's fall from an extraordinarily innocent naivety through the murder of his (innocent) wife. Again, in *The Lady from Shanghai*, Welles' naive protagonist is lured into a milieu of greed, murder and corruption through his fascination with a classically noirish heroine. He emerges, only just, having lost his innocence but having gained all abiding nostalgia for the woman responsible for the loss in the first place.

The theme of lost innocence leads on to a further set of meanings centred around the representation of women and sexuality. As Joseph McBride has noted:

*It is significant that Welles should give a beautiful woman, his former wife [Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*] the most precise formulation of his ultimate sin... The temptation offered by women in Welles' world is that of passivity, of sentimental and distracting reassurance, of a sheltering from reality which can become crippling. Mrs Kane's sled, Isabel's selfless devotion, Desdemona's purity, Raina's innocence, Doll Tearsheet's 'flattering busses', all these are touching evocations of a vanished past to which the hero may return for a vision of the alternative to the mania for power.*¹²

McBride's account of the function of women in Welles' films clearly indicates the relationship between the themes of women, nostalgia and power. However, it underplays the extent to which the lure of women and the lure of the past can be seen to provide the structural *motivation* for the protagonist's 'mania for power'. All three elements of the Wellesian thematic find themselves mutually determined and overdetermined around an Oedipal problematic in which the desire to break the Law (to kill the Father) is motivated by a desire for the Mother (a desire to occupy the position of the child), while the desire for the Mother generates an anxiety (and a form of repression) such that she comes to

¹¹ Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema*, New York, Dutton, 1968, p 79.

¹² Joseph McBride, *Orson Welles*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1972, pp 104-105.

occupy the position of guilt. Stephen Heath's description of the Oedipal complexities at the heart of *Touch of Evil* is thus more generally applicable (despite the shifting variations in their precise articulation from film to film: elements of the female image may be split between several characters, just as elements of the Faust image may be). Heath identifies an opposition in *Touch of Evil* between 'purity and mixture ... law and desire', the latter, in each case, marked, textually and verbally, as 'unpleasant':

*What the unpleasantness transposes... is the other side of the murder of the Father, the possession of the Mother. The film, the narrative, in other words, blocks the desire for and of the mother by punishing the Mother for the murder of the Father... The woman figures as the fault of desire; to destroy—to clean—her is thus to rid oneself... of a repressed homosexuality... The narrative, its logic, is traced ceaselessly between the Ideal Father and the Phallic Mother...*¹³

Hence the very tension, 'traced ceaselessly between the Ideal Father and the Phallic Mother', present at all levels in Welles' films.

Welles' style can in some ways be seen as determined by a similar Oedipal logic, both in its address and in the fantasies it inscribes in the relationship between text and spectator. In his introduction to Bazin's book, Francois Truffaut remarks that 'The films of Orson Welles are shot by an exhibitionist and cut by a censor.' The epigram usefully points to the element of *display* essential to Welles' style and to the structure of repression which underlies it. This theme of exhibitionism has been elaborated by Andrew Sarris:

*Mark Shivas has established a Welles-Hitchcock contrast both thematically and technically with the observation that Welles is concerned with the ordinary feelings of extraordinary people and Hitchcock with the extraordinary feelings of ordinary people... To a limited extent, at least, Wellesian cinema is as much the cinema of the exhibitionist as Hitchcockian cinema is the cinema of the voyeur.*¹⁴

The exhibitionist-voyeur contrast, while suggestive of certain differences between the

films of Welles and Hitchcock, is less an opposition, than a dialectical relationship. Exhibitionism implies voyeurism, just as the exhibitionist implies the voyeur. Any distinction ultimately lies in the position accorded either within the same structure of fantasy: in exhibitionism, the position of the voyeur is repressed and in voyeurism the position of the exhibitionist is repressed. Interestingly, these observations accord precisely with the nature of Welles' films. There is a clear and evident element of display, but it coincides with an element of concealment, of disavowal, of 'censorship' (to use Truffaut's term). Welles' style is a style of display, but it is founded on the censorship of the means, techniques and meanings that compose it. Hence the constant critical references to Welles as magician, conjuring illusions before our very eyes while at the same time deftly concealing the basis of his tricks. Now you see it, now you don't. At this point it is worth introducing a third quotation, this time from Bazin, which refers to Welles' penchant, as an actor, for false noses. Whatever it may reveal about Welles's own personality, it encapsulates precisely the structure of exhibitionism and repression involved in the films, while hinting also at their Oedipal foundations. Bazin begins by quoting Welles himself: 'For all normal uses, my own nose is quite pleasant and fairly decorative. It stopped growing, however, when I was ten years old...'¹⁵ He goes on:

*One will note that this justification [for wearing false noses in performance] refers not only to his nose's shape but also to its childlike aspect... I also recall a conversation with Orson Welles in which he conjured up before me the pleasure of acting on the stage with a corrected nose. He didn't even invoke the exigencies of style, but rather the need of a mask, that little shield of cardboard of modelling paste which suffices to defend you from the public. Acting with an exposed nose is like approaching the footlights naked.*¹⁶

The BBC retrospective offers a chance to analyse these elements more carefully, thus opening Welles' films to more general cinematic issues.

¹³ Heath, op cit, vol 16, no 2, pp 93-94.

¹⁴ Sarris, op cit, pp 79-80.

¹⁵ Bazin, *Orson Welles*, op cit, p 14.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p 41.

IN THE LAND OF THE GOOD IMAGE

MICK EATON REVIEWS THE WORK OF
HUMPHREY JENNINGS

For those of us born into post-war Britain the days of the Blitz exist as a memory of a world we never knew—a golden age when, in spite of the sacrifices of a home-front economy and the continual imminence of death, there was a real sense of national unity and working class solidarity and a vision of a better world to rise from the rubble of Britain's battered cities. Those were the days which preceded our conception, days when our parents met and fell

in love, days which cannot be approached by us without a mixed feeling of nostalgic loss coupled with cynical doubt. For somehow the picture does not match our own experiences of a Britain riven with class, gender and generational differences, a working class fractured by consumerism, preyed upon by the ideologues of racism.

The films of Humphrey Jennings are unapproachable outside of these contradictions.



An 'anthropology of our own people'—Coronation Day (May 12, 1937) photomontage by Humphrey Jennings.

And they alone would be enough to make this small body of cinematic work of moment today. But there is also the status Jennings has acquired of a forgotten film-maker – the way his work seems, in the few pieces that have been written about him, to hold the promise of a secret British cinema, eclipsed by the dour self-promotion of Griersonian social democracy. Another inquiry is warranted, not in order to establish Jennings in some rightful place as the nation's greatest film-artist, but rather to discover whether there is any value in his approach to image-making for work in the particularly British and specifically state subsidised context of today.

In any other country than Britain it might not be considered outrageous for a film-maker to be concerned with a general cultural project. Interestingly enough, Jennings is the only British film-maker (to the best of my knowledge) whose work is in the repertoire of the Anthology Film Archives, but this work has never been shown on British television. Largely because of his interest and involvement in photography, painting and literature, he was dismissed by many of his documentarist colleagues as something of a dilettante.

As the January-February 1982 exhibition at London's Riverside Studios demonstrates, and the David Mellor's essay in the accompanying dossier¹ attempts to argue, this dismissal was particularly short-sighted. Jennings' work demonstrates a remarkable, even slightly obsessive, consistency, not only in his repertoire of motifs (the ploughs, churches, locomotives in his paintings find their way into his movies) but also in the way he continually re-used his own images of this material – photographing his paintings, making sketches of scenes from his films, writing poems about the landscapes he painted.

Mellor's 'Sketch for an Historical Portrait' indicates that much of Jennings' work could not be collected for this exhibition, and, of course, many of his writings remain unknown – in particular *Pandaemonium*, his unpublished montage of texts about the English Civil War and the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, most of the available comment on Jennings

simply reworks material culled from pieces written by his friends and admirers shortly after his death in 1950. Three of the most influential source texts, by Charles Madge, Kathleen Raine and Lindsay Anderson, are reprinted in the dossier. Frustratingly, each of them, in their zeal to promote their unrecognised friend, tend to claim Jennings for their own traditions: as an embryonic Communist (Madge), a mystic (Raine), or Britain's only film-poet (Anderson). All of them extract elements from his work which have ossified into received opinion, ignoring both context and contradiction. Only Mellor's essay sets the work within British modernism of the 1930s and '40s, but this in itself forestalls a contemporary appropriation of it. Thus we need to have more of his extra-cinematic work made available to us, not in order to create a fully coherent aesthetic personality, but, paradoxically, in order to dislodge the picture of Jennings as secret auteur, revealed only to the few.

In this respect the collection of documents assembled for the dossier by Jennings' daughter marks a valuable departure point. From them it emerges that his theoretical approaches to cultural production, although clear, were rarely systematised and more concerned with painting than cinema. Indeed, in this collection of writings Jennings mentions films hardly at all: he talks of the Marx Brothers ('surrealism for the million') and looks forward to *La Bête Humaine*, but this is because 'it is all about trains'. Nevertheless, from these writings we can make certain inferences about his cinematic practice, particularly in regard to the use of montage.

Here we need to consider again two aspects of his work that have been mentioned often enough before: Jennings' involvement with surrealism and with Mass Observation, that ambitious investigation into British life and culture which took place between 1936 and 1947. Reading the initiatory statement that Charles Madge, Tom Harrisson and Jennings launched in the *New Statesman and Nation* in January 1937, and looking again at *May the Twelfth: Mass Observation Day Surveys 1937*², which Jennings put together with Madge and others, the reader cannot fail to be struck by the inherently

¹ David Mellor, 'Sketch for an Historical Portrait of Humphrey Jennings', in *Humphrey Jennings: Film-Maker, Painter, Poet* ed Mary-Lou Jennings, London, British Film Institute, 1982, pp 63-72.

² Humphrey Jennings, Charles Madge (eds), *May the Twelfth: Mass Observation Day Surveys 1937*, London, Faber and Faber, 1937.

contradictory nature of the project. For a start, the contradiction between the market-research 'scientific' description of an unknown England that MO was supposed to produce and the implication that this knowledge was to be put to political use, for the purposes of 'transformation', is wholly unresolved. Similarly, the premise that Mass Observation allowed people to 'speak for themselves', sits somewhat uneasily with the presentation of the reports. For although the observers (whose numbers grew to 1,500) were encouraged to write about 'what happens from day to day' omitting no detail, however insignificant, and although there is some attempt made to code this information 'scientifically', the fact of selection from reports and the (often ironic) juxtaposition of these selections makes *May the Twelfth* of interest today on the level of its 'literariness' rather than its 'scientificity'. If this is market research in method it is closer to James Joyce than J Walter Thompson in effect. The 'people' spoke for themselves, but the public school and Oxbridge trained editors chose and ordered their words.

The use of juxtaposition and contradiction can be most clearly seen in the 'sample problems' suggested for examination in the 1937 *New Statesman* manifesto:

Behaviour of people at war memorials
Shouts and gestures of motorists
The aspidistra cult
Anthropology of football pools
Bathroom behaviour
Beards, armpits, eyebrows
Anti-semitism
Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke
Funerals and undertakers
Female taboos about eating
*The private lives of midwives*³

This list could be seen as a serious attempt to apply anthropological method to British life, a forerunner of academic departments of 'cultural studies' or as a parody of the spines of a demented ethnographer's bookshelves, a forerunner of future Oxbridge comedy. What interests me about this inventory, though, is its quality as *montage*: not only do we see montage within items (for example 'the private lives of midwives'), but also montage between them

('Beards, armpits, eyebrows' standing next to 'Anti-semitism' – an intellectual montage of the grotesque and the politically important that Eisenstein would have been proud of).

As in *Mass Observation*, the work of Jennings and his collaborators attempted to transform the familiar iconography of British life through the revelation of the bizarre in the everyday, the strangeness in the ordinary. In his films this revelation is effected through montage both within and between shots. There are innumerable examples of this: the famous juxtaposition from *Listen to Britain* (1942) of Flanagan and Allen singing 'Down Sunnyside Lane' in a works canteen with Myra Hess playing a Mozart piano concerto in the National Gallery in the presence of that national matriarch, the Queen; or the more obscure montage in the frame from *A Diary for Timothy* (1944-45): the shot of King's College chapel, Cambridge, filmed not as usual from the daffodil-lined backs of the Cam, but through Cambridge market so that the frame is filled with people doing their shopping. Again, in *A Diary for Timothy*, we see a Welsh school children's choir singing on stage. A cut to a long shot reveals them standing under a massive hammer



Listen to Britain: Flanagan and Allen (above), Myra Hess playing Mozart (below).



³ Mary-Lou Jennings, op cit, p 17.

and sickle with a banner proclaiming 'Greetings to the Red Army and the Glorious Forces of the United Nations'.

This brings us back to the surrealist influence so often cited in writings on Jennings, a member of the Organising Committee of the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition with André Breton and Herbert Read. But where his application of the techniques of French surrealism in paintings and collages (Swiss rolls in the foothills of the Alps et al.) seems mechanical and derivative, his films mark a departure. Here the principles of construction and frame composition dependent on juxtaposition and chance combination are of course paramount, but this seems closer to Soviet montage in its overall effect than to French surrealism.

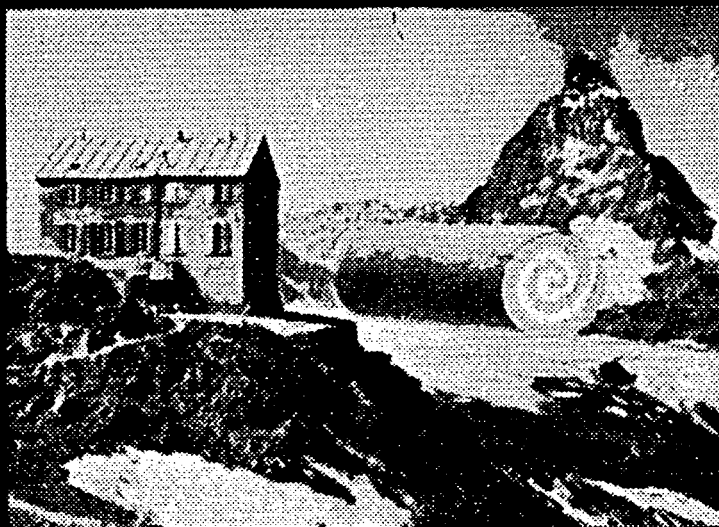
A clue to the way that Jennings' attitude towards surrealism seemed to shift is to be found in two pieces reprinted in the catalogue: 'Who does that Remind You Of?' (October 1938) and 'Tableaux Parisiens' (undated but apparently from the same period). Discussing still photography he rejects the camera as 'simply the mechanisation of realism' and states that

*intellectually the importance of the camera lies clearly in the way in which it deals with problems of choice – choice and the avoidance of choice. Freud (Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Chapter 12) says that the feeling of Déjà Vu... 'corresponds to the memory of an unconscious fantasy'. The camera is precisely an instrument for recording the object or image that prompted the memory*⁴.

So the photographic image operates as a fulfillment of the already existent fantasy. Here lies the possibility for the move from the merely random 'surrealist' juxtaposition, towards the production of a dialectic between the image and personal/social memory.

If there is any basis whatsoever in the idea of the production of a 'third meaning' from the juxtaposition of two elements in dialectical montage, its most important ramification is that this meaning cannot be completely circumscribed in advance. It must always oscillate between the personal and the social. Meaning will thus be dependent upon the dialectic between the psychoanalytic history of the individual reader/producer, and the class, national, gender, etc.

⁴ *ibid*, p 20.



Surrealist influences: photograph of Jennings' 'Swiss roll' collage.



Jennings (standing on car left) during the production of *A Diary for Timothy* (1944-45).

positions of that same individual. Montage may produce an effect, but not always the one you'd thought of (to which Eisenstein's writings on his own films so often bear witness).

Jennings himself challenged fixity of meaning, arguing at the end of his life that:

It is essential to observe that this selection and presentation of images does not depend in any way on... symbolism. They may or may not have been used as symbols of this and that in the past but at present they are simple images... An apple cannot immediately become a coal. But an image of an object is immediately exchangeable with another image.⁵

In his poem 'La Charrue', Jennings substitutes the national signifiers of French painting for British equivalents: 'the plough is the English guitar'. We also see this repeatedly in the films: there is an exchangeability or interchangeability of the images of objects. As objects they carry national connotations, but when transformed into images of objects they can, at best, function as an interrogation of the terms of nationality.

As an aesthetic theory (if that is what it is) this is not without its idealism (despite Charles Madge's 'marxist' gloss on this). As a practice it also carries some dangers. The national images that Jennings so frequently employs are so socially over-determined that their contradictory combination results in an off-screen construction of national unity in which the image of 'Britain' is defined as the sum of these components – a unity that can accommodate this diversity. This construction of national unity (so often repellent to today's audiences) was, no doubt, a necessary aim of the Crown Film Unit's propaganda brief during the War and is the overwhelming effect of *Words for Battle* (1941), *Listen to Britain* (1942), and *Fires were Started* (1943). No matter how much the diegetic space of individual film sequences is fractured (and the sequence with the women workers in *Listen to Britain* would stand as exemplary here) the ideological space of a united Britain remains.

But in *Diary for Timothy* the impossibility of national unity becomes apparent, the diversity of sounds and images can no longer, in 1945, construct an unproblematic offscreen 'Britain' outside of class contradictions for an imminent

⁵ *ibid* p 46.

84 peace-time economy. Once again Jennings' film practice, like Eisenstein's, depends on an aesthetic of fragmentation which aims at a unity of emotional and/or intellectual response. It is up to us to interrogate the latter by means of the former.

There is another danger inherent in Jennings' (and his editor/collaborator Stewart McAllister's) use of the editing table in addition to the construction of a British unity. This is the, again off-screen, construction of an authorial unity. The selection and articulation of diverse sounds and images produce the effect of a transcendent, all-seeing artist. This may well be worked against by the social nature of the images and the unpredictability of audience response, but it has greatly affected the critical mediation and reception of the material. Contradictions are ignored to present us with Jennings as the all-round aesthetic personality. This attitude was also present in Jennings' own attitude towards his work, as the following poem from 1941 – a draft of which was exhibited at the Riverside – serves to indicate:

*I see a thousand strange sights in the streets of
London
I see the clock on Bow Church burning in daylight
I see a one-legged man crossing the fire on crutches
I see three negroes and a woman with white face
powder reading music at half past three in the
morning
I see the burnt drums of the philharmonic
I see the green leaves of Lincolnshire carried through
London on the wrecked body of an aircraft.*

Again, the images are full of montage between and within units but they are all united by the unchanging 'I see'.

This picture of the rather aloof aesthete scanning British culture and taking from it images which are solipsistically woven into an idiosyncratic vision – a picture which the above poem constructs and which many of his contemporaries held – is somewhat belied by the information we have of Jennings' involvement with the people he filmed. His letters to his wife during the filming of *Fires were Started* and *The Silent Village* (1943) suggest the way working with people changed Jennings' attitudes:

*It has now become 14 hours a day – living in
Stepney the whole time – really never have worked
so hard at anything or I think thrown myself into
anything so completely. Whatever the results it is*

*definitely an advance in film-making for me – really
beginning to understand people and making friends
with them and not just looking at them or lecturing
and pitying them. Another general effect of the
war.⁶*

This growth in understanding is, of course, something which is not necessarily perceptible on the level of the finished film-texts.

There are many other aspects of Jennings' work which need discussion: the use of sound in films; the use of colour in the paintings; the generic quality of *Fires were Started* as a 'group of men from diverse backgrounds brought together through alien attack' film; and especially the role his films can play in relation to debates about the history of British socialism at a time when the memory of 1945 is continually evoked. These issues remain, but I would like to finish by giving some indication of the way that Jennings' work is being re-examined by contemporary British film-makers.

In the North East, Trade Films have shown and discussed Jennings' *The Cumberland Story* (1947), a film which is by no means as rich as his war-time work, but whose theme of nationalising the coal industry has proved of interest to local miners' groups. Roger Buck's recent *Industrial Britain* seems to follow Jennings (despite the Griersonian derivation of its title) as an extended interrogation of national unity and colonial history, developed through a montage of quotations. In Nottingham, Frank Abbott's forthcoming *Workers Playtime* develops the 'One man went to mow' sequence from *Fires were Started* as a metaphor for labour relations in the early days of broadcasting. Abbott's film, and my own attempts at deconstructing the notion of 'the bizarre in the everyday' in *A Description of the World*, are both greatly influenced by Jennings. Marc Karlin and Don Macpherson's work for their television project on History and Memory equally owes much to Jennings' Blitz films. The legacy of such work is very evident in independent film-making today, although not always in ways which would be saluted, or even recognised, by some of Humphrey Jennings' admirers.

⁶ *ibid*, p 31.

The title of this review comes from a poem of Humphrey Jennings about Burma, and the article owes a great deal to discussions with Frank Abbott.

REMODELLING PHOTO-HISTORY

85

AN AFTERWORD ON A RECENT EXHIBITION BY TERRY DENNETT AND JO SPENCE

How the work came about

This collaboration between two photographers (using themselves both as photographer and as photographic object) stems from our joint interests in photography and in politics. We've attempted to engage with some of the current theories of visual representation, while at the same time offering a critique of standard histories of photography, which still mostly exclude details of institutional, state, class or economic determinants, being grounded instead in 'great inventions', 'great names', 'great companies'.

We also hoped that the tension between us as two individuals, with overlapping philosophies of historical materialism – grounded here in Terry's study of specific apparatuses and the economic point of production as central to any understanding of history, and Jo's interest in women in a class society in relation to reproduction and domestic labour – could productively raise a series of presently unvoiced questions. The work also comes out of our (separate) experience – as a scientific photographer and photo-historian (Terry), and as a commercial and portrait photographer, now analysing a visual/socio-economic history of the family (Jo).

We produced *The History Lesson* in response to an invitation to an exhibition organised in the United States at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Called 'Ten Contemporary British Photographers', it opened at MIT in February 1982, before beginning a tour. The organizer reported that our work provoked considerable

discussion, with the comment 'Too obvious' at one end of the spectrum, and 'Can't understand what they're doing' at the other. We both felt that it could have another life as a short, polemical, 'tongue-in-cheek' teaching work for photographic and art courses and workshops in this country. To this end a second set of laminated prints are now available for loan or hire. So far these have been used on several very different occasions and have always provoked lively and productive discussions between students and teachers.

We were especially keen to provide a starting point for discussion between men and women in the controversial area of the representation of the female body (where it is argued at one extreme that to even show the female body is problematic, while at the other some still seek to tinker with the dominant 'stereotypes' of women without engaging with wider questions of cultural production). During discussions in mixed groups it has become apparent that people continually collapse 'the real' into notions of 'visual representation' – talking about the photographic images in the classroom as if they were a reflection of the bodies of the women who stood before the camera in the first place, which in themselves produced specific 'effects' on men. This makes it difficult to get beyond personal confrontation between those present, often silencing and shaming individual men, closing down discussions, and never moving to a point where the institutions and signifying practices of photography could be analysed.

Another observation from this work, noted in discussions applying psychoanalytic theory to photography, has been a problematic separation

of questions relating to sexuality and the family from any consideration of apparatuses and institutions involved in the regulation and repression of people's labour, and of their sexual and reproductive lives. While acknowledging that this other work exists it is seldom dealt with on photographic courses.

Photographic theory (scant as it is) has now run so far ahead of most people engaged in the everyday world of photography that very often students turn away in despair from *any* notion of theory. Both of us are concerned that useful critical work should be given forms which make it more accessible. We are beginning (hopefully) to produce images and texts which could be used in the photographic press itself as a tiny wedge against the sexist, racist and class assumptions underpinning most of these publications, rather than continue with the marginalization of such work to 'art', 'serious', or 'political' magazines.

Working method

From the start we made a joint decision not to rely on what we could find to photograph (in the classic documentary sense), nor solely on forms of montage of visual elements at the post-shooting stage of production, nor on 'subversive' texts. Instead we moved to a form of 'photo theatre'. This is a totally non-naturalistic mode of *re*-presentation which aims to create 'a spectacle' while drawing upon, and yet slightly disrupting, well known genres of photography. (A good example of this can be seen in 'Colonization', where Jo as social actor is dressed and placed in an environment which is then photographed in anthropological style. The fragmented foot is then photographically treated as if it were within a medical discourse – but note too how the foot has been colonized here by nail polish.) In this way we have a twin performance – the staging and acting out of a tableau for the camera, and then a two-dimensional signifying performance on paper.

Within this framework we were able to have extended discussions after our normal hours of (paid) work, to pre-visualise and script everything (but still leave room for an element of spontaneity at the shooting stage). It also meant that we could reshoot anything we were not entirely satisfied with. We did this work sporadically across several months, using

weekends to drive around looking for props and locations, and to do the actual shooting. (We could write a book about the experience of trying to photograph the naked female body out of doors on 'public property' – in legal terms it constitutes a form of indecency.) Drawing upon our long since forgotten professional experience we were able to choose how to depict a range of styles and genres (both contemporary and historical) to indicate some of the ways in which women's labour and sexuality have been represented, within and across various institutions of photography and state apparatuses.

Of course this work does not attempt to be a definitive statement, but merely a way of beginning a visual mapping process. In parallel with this we wanted to begin a study of visual sexual difference, moving to the male body – whatever we felt would constitute an equivalent set of images – but the asymmetry of male/female representation made this difficult to conceptualize.

As well as providing materials for a 'history lesson' we wanted also to re-examine the model/photographer relationship which is generally one-sided (though not universally so: police photography has a fairly rigid set of routines and a fixed power relationship, artist and model relate in an entirely different – but nonetheless rigid – way, while snapshotting is a variable power relationship). At the same time as we drew upon our own knowledge of dominant signifying and technical practices of portraiture, record, still life, documentary realism, 'nude photography' and the snapshot, we also traversed signifying practices from within anthropology, fine art, news, advertising, science, law, medicine, welfare and charity institutions. For this work we have not attempted the futile task of trying to invent another photographic language, but rather have tried to indicate how photographs which are usually given currency and circulated within different (and contradictory) spheres, can when brought together enable the viewer to begin to make new, and perhaps political, connections. We thus worked within the rough parameters of the given practice. With one exception (where we used a 35mm camera with a fish-eye wide angle lens) we used throughout a 5" x 4" Linhof stand camera, with 150mm or 65mm lenses, working always on

a tripod. We shot on Ilford FP4 black and white cut film, using daylight or on-camera flash. Additionally, we decided that a very sparse use of text – what amounted to a *recategorization process* – was all that was needed. Further work for students in deciding upon and trying out new forms of categorization to see how meanings can shift about could perhaps be productive here.

We structured the final work so that it would ‘hang’ off the upright central panel (‘Subordination’). The upper image uses an obviously narrative style which has proliferated in fashion and erotic photography in the past ten to fifteen years, notably in the work of Helmut Newton. Here a crime often appears to have been committed and the female body is used as a sado-masochistic motif, erotically displayed for the camera. However we tried to strip the image of its eroticism and shift towards a type of reportage. By siting our ‘victim’ on the boundaries of that which is geographically signalled as ‘private property’, we hoped to create an ambiguity as to whether the victim had been trying to escape from or into this fenced-in world. We decided to juxtapose this with an image of housework which we tried to encode with traces of the documentary social realism of photographers such as Dorothea Lange in ’30s America. However, we also wanted it to suggest (through our use of lighting and exposure control) the heroicization of work in ’20s Soviet photography. While this might seem a contradictory aim, we both felt that attempts to make unproblematic statements about the glories of work, or to try to bring about social reform but not change the social structures, were not entirely unconnected.

The History Lesson attempts to explore the relationship between the apparatuses which use photography, the institutions which *validate* or teach photographic practices, and the role of women in the family. We also wanted to indicate throughout a certain consistency and overlap in the ways in which women and other subordinated groups are represented. Thus the project offers a starting point from *within* photography, but one which should allow us to move beyond the eternal textual analysis of single images. Only then can we ask what is *not* being said, what cannot be said (what is visually unsayable), what is being displaced or rendered structurally absent.

In asking what is absent we enter the realms of the analytical, be it through psychoanalysis or historical materialism. The former engages with the construction of gendered subjectivity and ‘unconscious desire’, positioning us within texts in specific discourses, the latter with the possibility of conscious scientific and historical knowledge, and the possibility of political change. Both address memory – that which is considered unthinkable/unspeakable, censored from consciousness, and that which in terms of class/power struggles is *rendered invisible*, not spoken about or shown, and often is indeed actively suppressed.

Moving on?

From this initial mapping process we moved into another phase of the project where notions of specific reworkings of dominant icons (eg the mother and infant relationship as epitomized in the ‘madonna and (male) child’) now enabled us to formulate new questions. The idea of staging woman as universal ‘love object’ and ‘eternal nurturer’ was fraught with personal and political problems – for at this point we began to include more explicitly the male figure inside our scenarios. Easily done using actors, or when drawing or painting – not so easily attempted when it begins to foreground the private and public relationship between two specific photographers with a ‘personal’ history, working within a public ‘history of photography’. In pre-visualizing each element in the project, we were often concerned about offering potential readings which might be construed as ‘pornographic’ – most especially in the madonna image – but we wanted there to be a tension about the status of any reading. This, however, is totally separate from any ‘effect’ the staging of such scenarios might have on us! Would our families ever see it? What about the neighbours? Would our colleagues think we’d gone mad? In other words, would people start to wonder if we were ‘really like that’... Thus at this point ‘representation’ and ‘the real’ began to coincide, pointing to another area of work which we are now developing.

Pleasure

Apart from hoping to give *critical* visual pleasure to our audience, part of our project has been to

find a pleasurable new way of working together. Previous collaboration had always revolved around notions of photography for 'social and political action' and we wanted to do something which would allow us to explore our personal, as well as our photographic and political, relationship.

Towards the end of the project, where a more specifically feminist voice is allowed to speak out – often ironically – Jo enjoyed moving from considerations of the dominant practices to a different kind of portraiture. She also realized that throughout (almost unthinkingly) she had been making statements about her right to 'exhibit' herself as a 47-year-old social actor, in daring to offer some very different renderings of the female body from those, say, in women's magazines. In that particular homogenized and de-classed world, where everything is idealized (or potentially able to be so through the offer of endless 'improvements' to self, home and family), women are enjoined to identify with the universalizing effects of photographic styles in fashion and advertising which minimise skin texture and colour, disguise sagging flesh and flabby, tired or diseased bodies, and efface the aging process.

In the course of this project we also discovered the difficulty of making a non-linear piece of work without a narrative resolution. Instead, we decided to have the 'object of the look' metaphorically cleanse herself and look back, reflecting the voyeuristic activity of both photographer and viewer in looking at her. Thus our inclusion of the vignetting 'tunnel effect' of the lens used to take the picture.

Finally, we wished to pose some questions beyond the scope of these images. Since we'd been working within a Brechtian tradition of distanciation, trying to transform feeling into thinking through a form of 'educational entertainment', we turned to Brecht's own writing. His questioning poem, coming from outside photography, seemed relevant to the overall problems of history – both of the individual gendered subject, and to our positioning within a hierarchical class society. (Incidentally, what we can't or don't ask of most photographs is questions of *their* history.)

This exhibition is available from PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP, 152 Upper Street, London, N1 1RA. It consists of a small introductory panel, plus 7 panels roughly 66×47mm, laminated and ready to hang.

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THE HISTORY LESSON: SELF AS IMAGE

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN
PHOTOGRAPHERS



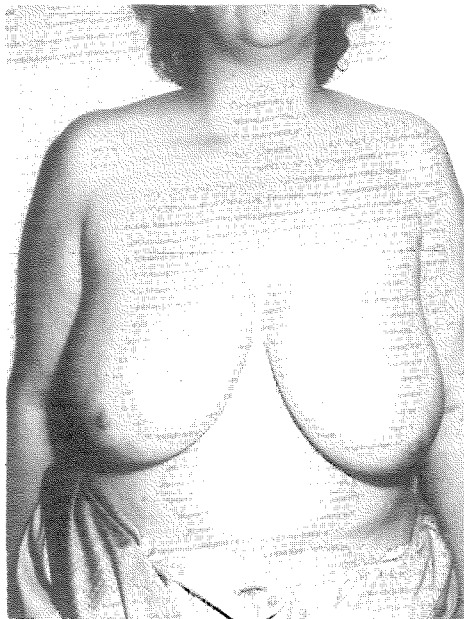
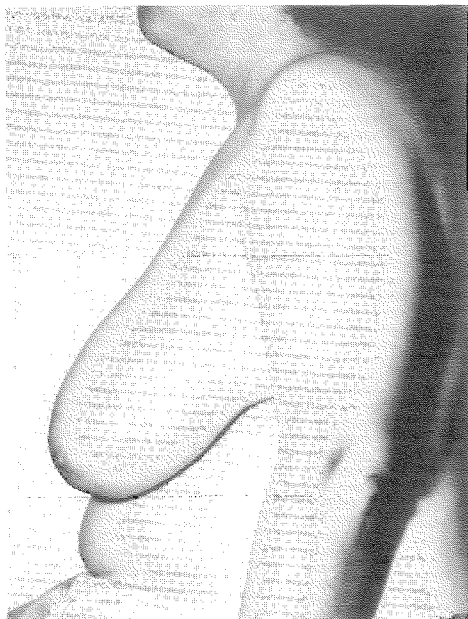
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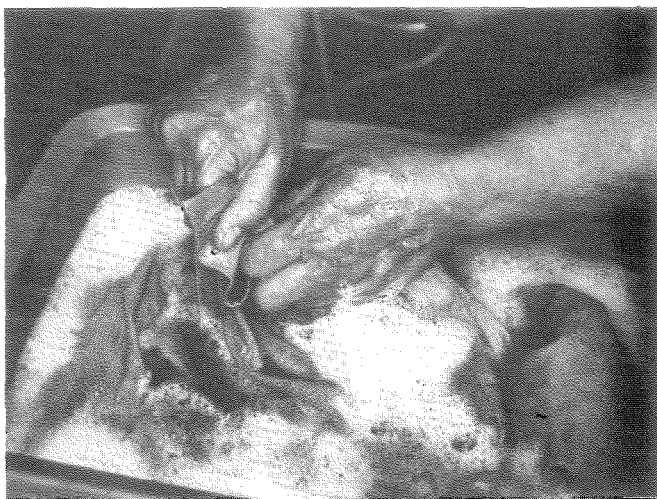


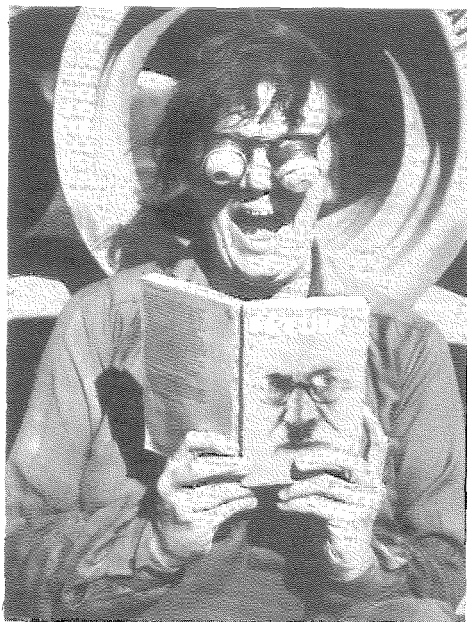
COLONIZATION



REGULATION

SUBORDINATION





REALIZATION



SELF AS IMAGE



Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
 In the books you will find the names of kings.
 Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
 And Babylon, many times demolished
 Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
 Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
 Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
 Did the masons go? Great Rome
 Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom
 Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in
 Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
 The night the ocean engulfed it
 The drowning still bawled for their slaves . . .

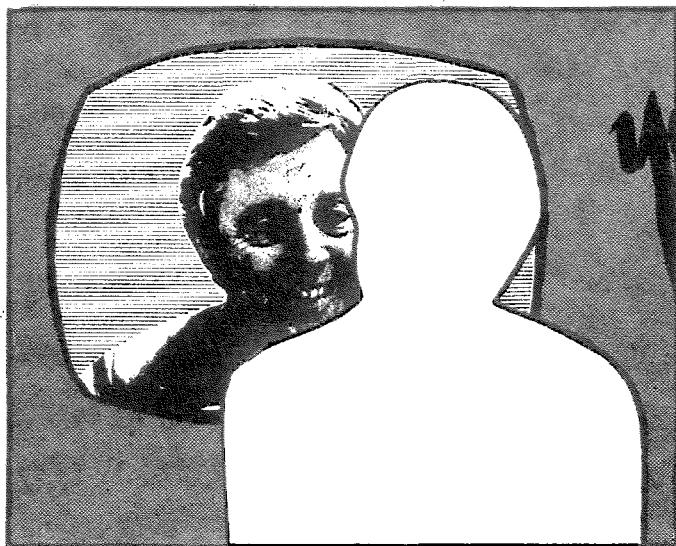
Every page a victory.
 Who cooked the feast for the victors?
 Every ten years a great man.
 Who paid the bill?

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 So many questions.

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By Howard Tumber

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The Report was produced with support from the BBC and IBA by the Broadcasting Research Unit of the British Film Institute.

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